

Screen



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***Mandy* and possibility**

ANNETTE KUHN

Language brings us together; it pulls us apart; it makes possible our fictions of the past, and our imaginings of the future.

After a hard struggle towards understanding what language is, what it is for, a congenitally deaf child speaks her first words at the age of seven: first of all naming her mother ('Mummy'), then herself ('Mandy').

Mandy is a character in a film, the pivotal figure of a family drama.¹ Mandy's parents disagree over how their daughter should be brought up: the father favours keeping the child at home, the mother wants to send her to a special school. The conflict threatens to split the couple as Mandy, taken away by her mother to attend a school for the deaf, embarks on her own lonely struggles with communication, learning to live with others outside her own family. Various obstacles along the path serve to convince Mandy's father that he has been right all along; Mandy should stay at home. In the end, though, the mother's risk is rewarded, and the rift in the family healed, when Mandy at last speaks her own name.

It is 1952: Mandy's story unfolds on a cinema screen in West London, watched by a little girl of about Mandy's age who has been brought along by her mother to see this picture everyone is talking about. The little girl sees only Mandy: her heart goes out to this deaf-mute child who, with her pigtails, woollen pleated skirt, muffler and gloves, could so easily be herself. She desperately wants Mandy to triumph. At the end of the film, showing the world she can now 'listen', can understand ('Lend us your ball', shouts a boy among a group of children at play. Mandy offers it to him with a smile.

¹ *Mandy*, d. Alexander Mackendrick; p. Leslie Norman; sc. Jack Whittingham and Nigel Balchin; cast Jack Hawkins (Richard Searle), Terence Morgan (Harry Garland), Phyllis Calvert (Christine Garland), Mandy Miller (Mandy Garland); released July 1952. US title: *Crash of Silence*.

‘What’s your name?’ he asks), Mandy makes the supreme effort to utter her name. With an equally intense effort of concentration, the girl in the audience wills the sound to come from those silently mouthing lips; inwardly, urgently, speaks the name for her; feels such release when Mandy at last, in flat uninflected tones, manages to achieve the two syllables; holds her breath once more in the moment before the boy responds (will he understand these strange sounds? will he jeer?); weeps with joy as Mandy runs off after the other children, spontaneously joining in their game.

Seeing her tears, seeing how affected she has been by Mandy, did that other little girl’s mother try to reassure her daughter: ‘It’s only a story’? Even if she understood this, the child had certainly been moved – changed – by this film; most particularly by Mandy’s long-awaited uttering of her own name. She was to find those sounds and images, and the feelings evoked by them, insistently memorable, held in the store of remembrance like a compelling dream, a vision, outside and beyond the everyday.

The little girl in the audience is, of course, an earlier version of the present writer.

1980: When, some twenty-eight years on, I was reintroduced to *Mandy*, it was in the context of a graduate seminar on British cinema that I was teaching at a university in the USA. Already, a couple of years earlier, I had been reminded of the film’s existence – now from the standpoint of the scholar – experiencing that pleasant and nervous shock of recognition that comes when, having gone up in the world, and feeling rather detached from the person one once was, one sees a half-forgotten former love on the other side of the street. Should one say hello, or just let the past be?

I had in fact not yet ventured to see the film again. Could I risk the potential disillusion of fresh acquaintance with an object so emotionally charged – or would it be wiser to turn aside, leaving childhood memories intact? In the end, curiosity won: I took the opportunity offered by the seminar. But as it transpired, in re-viewing the film in a culturally alien and, in scholarly and professional terms, rather demanding context – one which seemed to require an intellectual, and to eschew any affective, response – I did at that point succeed in defending my childhood vision.

All the same, *Mandy* responded well to the structuralist/semiotic approach adopted in the seminar, which proved both pedagogically rewarding and analytically productive. Among its more significant findings, for example, was the observation that, confounding conventional wisdom about the unobtrusive style of the Ealing product, some parts of *Mandy* are marked by an extraordinary degree of expressivity, at the levels of both sound and image: low-key lighting, marked camera angles, big distorted closeups, deep



Figure 1

2 For a critical and historical overview of Ealing, see, for example, Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron and Tayleur, 1977).



Figure 2



Figure 3

focus cinematography, narratively unmotivated mobile framing, distortions – even momentary absences – of diegetic sound.

The early scenes of the film, for example, which narrate the discovery by Harry and Christine Garland of their daughter's deafness, produce a 'disturbed' mise-en-scene which appears to speak the parents' own anxieties. The Garlands' faces are crossed by shadow, or their bodies are silhouetted against a backlight (figs 1 and 2); and we are at this stage introduced to a shot which will become a leitmotif: a point-of-view angle on the back of a character's head (fig. 3), suggesting not-hearing.

Other parts of *Mandy*, though, do retain some of the qualities of naturalistic realism more familiarly associated with Ealing films:² these are particularly apparent in scenes dealing with the education of the deaf, some of which have an almost documentary character (parts of the film were actually shot in a school for the deaf). And yet, certain features even of the setting in which the children are taught – the gloomy and cavernous Victorian gothic of the school's entrance hall and corridors, especially – echo the spaces associated with the film's more melodramatic moments. Here, and also at the points when Mandy's crisis erupts into the documentary discourse, the film's melodramatic qualities pervade its social realism, rather than vice versa.

Formal features of the text associated with the melodramatic on the one hand and with the realistic on the other, and the tension between these, pointed the seminar towards a certain symptomatic reading of the film. For at the levels of both narrative and mise-en-scene the world of the family in *Mandy* is constructed as repressive and confining, while the question of communication and its lack inhabits the film's visual and auditory space at several levels. It transpired that, in ways which might not be immediately apparent, *Mandy* foreshadows the family melodramas, better known today, which were to emerge from Hollywood later in the 1950s.

In such a seminar, a symptomatic reading of *Mandy* evidently offers rich rewards. But the method of film analysis which generates that reading – one directed primarily at textual systematicity – made it rather more difficult for the class to address those broader questions of intertext, context and reception which are raised with some urgency when dealing with a national cinema. While, in the US context, a shying away from the 'Britishness' of *Mandy*'s provenance and an emphasis on what the film shares with Hollywood might be understandable and perhaps even salutary, a more-or-less exclusive attention to the inner workings of the film text did permit evasion of other issues worthy of exploration.

Such omissions go beyond the contextual, moreover. Questions concerning *affect* in spectators' responses to films – particularly pressing in the instance of the melodrama – are also virtually ruled

- 3 On the Hollywood family melodrama and 'excess', see Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minelli and melodrama', and Laura Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987), pp. 70–9. For a discussion of melodrama and affect, see Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and tears', *Screen*, vol. 27, no.6 (1988), pp. 6–22.

out of order in text-centred criticism. Even reception theory seems to fare little better in this regard.

It is significant, then, that a reading of *Mandy* which emphasizes the film's qualities as melodrama,³ while usefully directing attention to the significance of relations between the Garlands and placing the character Mandy herself within the frame of those family relations, does underplay the significance of Mandy's own story – her quest to break out of isolation and to communicate with others. It is unable to see, precisely because it is not looking for, Mandy's struggles to listen, speak, and enter society. At first sight, given that the film is so patently 'about' Mandy – the title is in itself explicit enough, after all – the omission is hard to understand. And yet it is certainly beyond doubt that the exclusion from the seminar of Mandy's story allowed me, as teacher, to defend my own childhood memories of the film – memories which had in fact constructed it precisely and simply as that: Mandy's story. All the rest – the conflict between Harry and Christine, the Searle–Christine subplot – I had taken on board only as an adult spectator. My memory of Mandy's story, though, not only remained intense; it also took the form of quite specific images and sounds – precisely those associated with Mandy's crisis moments, in fact. All of these remembered sounds and images were, and still are, highly emotionally charged.

It is the mid 1980s: Annette is in a Soho wine bar with a woman friend, also a film theorist. Somehow, the topic of *Mandy* enters the conversation, and the two women chat for a while about the film, in the way people who enjoy cinema, and enjoy ideas about cinema, do. Suddenly, Annette bursts into tears.

If the moment passed in ruefully understanding laughter, it was certainly an odd one. The tears had come, unbidden and insistent, from some part of Annette that was decisively not the film scholar, nor even the cinephile. The grownups' conversation had been interrupted by something inappropriate and other – a child's response, troubling and hard to ignore. The little Annette had at last successfully waylaid the adult, forcing some difficult questions onto the agenda.

How does a film scholar deal with a child's response to a film? Must such a response be excluded from the adults' conversation, from the intellectual, the analytical? What is the precise difference between these responses, the child's and the adult's? Are they irreconcilable, or can they be brought together in our endeavours to understand how films engage our emotions and our fantasies? Does the naive, the untutored, the everyday response have anything to offer the professional, the academic, the intellectual one?

For a film theorist, these are uncomfortable questions. Not only do they bring to centre stage some relatively familiar – and

enduringly difficult – problems concerning the reception of films, they also complicate these matters yet further by adding the elusive dimensions of feeling and memory. How can film theory address itself to the emotions films evoke, to the ways in which such emotions enter into people's fictions of the past, their own past? Any affective response to a film – and indeed recollections of such a response even more so – threatens to elude attempts to explain or intellectualize: not because the latter are somehow inadequate in the face of the former but because each category (memory/feeling as against explanation/analysis) seems to inhabit an entirely distinct register.

Emotion and memory bring into play a category with which film theory – and cultural theory more generally – are ill equipped to deal: experience. Indeed they have been wary even of making any attempt to deal with it, often rightly so. For experience is not infrequently played as the trump card of authenticity, the last word of personal truth; forestalling all further discussion, let alone analysis. Nevertheless, experience is undeniably a key category of everyday knowledge, structuring people's lives in important ways. So, just as I know perfectly well that the whole idea is a fiction and a lure, part of me also 'knows' that my experience – my memories, my feelings – are important because these things make me what I am, make me different from everyone else. Must they be consigned to a compartment separate from the part of me that thinks and analyses? Can the idea of experience not be taken on board – if with a degree of caution – by cultural theory, rather than being simply evaded or, worse, assigned to the realm of sentimentality and nostalgia?

The little girl wants to be heard, and children ask the hardest questions of all. The adult cannot pretend to offer all, or indeed perhaps any, of the right answers to the big questions the child's insistent interruptions pose for cultural theory and for film theory. But she can at least listen to what the little girl has to say. That, in this instance, must mean bringing the child's response to *Mandy* into the light of analytic day, holding on to it, and using it as material for interpretation. The film theorist does not thereby give herself over entirely to the child's demands, does not relinquish her analytic stance: rather, she expands the frame of her competence, sharpens and refines her perceptions.

Such a move immediately shifts attention to Mandy's story. It forces me to look, in a particular way, at the specificity of the story's address; at how it speaks to the child in both the child and the adult. It also lets me consider questions of feeling and memory in the context of the ways in which the film articulates, and seizes me into, its historical moment. It even suggests some fresh ways of reading films and doing film theory.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Mandy's predicament is central to the film's narrative trajectory: a – perhaps *the* – key problem set up for the narrative to deal with is her deafness, first discovered when she is around two years old. At six, Mandy – still unable to communicate, either with adults or with other children – is susceptible to violent, frustrated rages. She is taken to the Bishop David School for the Deaf, where on her first day she makes her first real contact with another child. Initially, however, she cannot settle in as a boarder, refuses to play with the other children, behaves uncontrollably; but on becoming a day pupil she starts making progress, learning to produce sounds. With extra coaching, she soon speaks her first word: 'Mummy'. She suffers a setback on being taken away from the school; but triumphs in the end by going out to meet a group of children playing behind her house, telling them her name, and joining in their game.

This version of the story traces the various stages of Mandy's entry into language, figured as a movement from isolation towards communication and sociability; from the nuclear family into the wider world. Success – of a provisional sort, perhaps – is achieved only after many ups and downs; and comes about as much through Mandy's own efforts as through those of the adults around her.

Narration of these events, however, shifts between several different viewpoints, each associated with a particular set of cinematic codes: that of Mandy's family, marked by 'melodramatic' codes; a 'documentary discourse' which details the development and learning problems posed by the handicap of deafness; and, finally, that of Mandy herself. Mandy's enunciation attempts to 'speak' muteness and isolation through certain distortions of sound and image, repeated at key moments in her development and conveying information, privileged to the spectator, concerning how she feels and why she behaves as she does.

For example, the narration of the scene in which Mandy first learns about sound draws us into her anxiety, frustration and rage at not understanding what the teacher is expecting of her. This short scene is composed of more than thirty shots, some of them, especially during the exchange between Mandy and the teacher around the mid point of the sequence, extremely brief. This latter section is composed largely of shot-reverse shot figures involving the two characters; and includes a series of six shots in this pattern (figs 6–11), starting when the sound of the teacher's voice encouraging Mandy fades from the soundtrack and the camera tracks in to a big, distorted, wide-angle closeup of the face of the child, disturbed and uncomprehending, as her lips touch the balloon the teacher is using as a demonstration of sound vibration.

The moment of silence – Mandy's auditory point of view, so to speak – is then broken: failing to understand what is required of her,



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

Mandy pulls away from the teacher and starts to scream and cry (fig. 12). This little series of shots – echoing, in its organization of sound and image, Mandy's previous moments of frustration – functions at this point in the film as prelude to the moment of breakthrough. This is given in a repetition of the earlier close shot of Mandy with the balloon, this time with sound added – that of Mandy's voice articulating 'b' (fig. 13): she has finally understood what sound is. It is a moment of condensation, in both aesthetic and psychoanalytic senses.

Mandy's story, then, is not just a series of events, but also a particular manner of narrating those events. Here must lie its powerful appeal to the little Annette, since my own childhood memories of the film are composed largely of visual and auditory flashes of those very crisis moments of Mandy's.

If the trajectory of Mandy's story traces a child's entry into language, albeit – because of her handicap – a peculiarly difficult one, this must also be the story of any childhood. Every child has to learn to speak, naming exactly the objects Mandy names – the first word she attempts is 'baby'; her first achieved utterances are 'Mummy', and then her own name. She names parts of her world and names herself, making them separate, placing herself apart from these objects and from the world. But at the same time, she must try to bridge this newly created gulf between herself and the world by means of the very thing that has created it, using language to hear and speak to others, to communicate.

Mandy's preoccupations are those of any six- or seven-year-old: she is ready to become a social being, to make contact with people outside her family, to play with other children. One of the most poignant moments of the film occurs when we first see the six-year-old Mandy. Christine, over a long shot of her daughter playing alone in the backyard of her grandparents' house, says: 'She spent the next five years being sheltered'. We cut to a medium closeup of Mandy looking through a wired-over gap in the brick wall of the yard; then to a shot, from Mandy's point of view, of children playing at a distance on the waste ground that lies on the other side of the wall. Finally, we return to a forlorn-looking Mandy (figs 14–17).

She is wearing the same winter outfit as the one she will have on in the film's final scene – presumably a year later – in which she will at last leave the house of her own volition and enter the world of the children. These two scenes mark the beginning and end points of Mandy's own story in the film: five or six years of 'normal' childhood have been condensed into one for her.



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24

If Mandy is like any child of her age, then, she is also other, different from 'normal' children: this is why we are told her story. I am like Mandy, and yet not like Mandy: in wanting to reach out to her as other, in recognizing her difference from – as much as her similarity to – me, do I learn through her story to understand the sufferings of others? Perhaps this film, and the child's response to it, embody a moment of learning to see others as both separate from, and also as sharing things in common with, oneself.

At such a distance of time, is it possible to disentangle the universal from the particular in all this? From today's vantage point (but at what level does a six-year-old know these things?), I can perhaps see parallels between Mandy's position within her family and mine within my own. But if a child's response to a film does resonate with the personal as well as with the universal, or perhaps rather draws the universal into the personal, does such a response not also connect with the historical moment of the film and its viewing?

Mandy was released seven years after the end of World War II; and although not overtly 'about' postwar Britain, the spaces of its narrative are certainly marked by the traces of war, most insistently in the image of the bombsite that lies behind the house of Mandy's grandparents and figures in several of the film's key moments, including the final scene.

At the close of the scene early in the film when the two-year-old Mandy is brought to live at her grandparents' house, we see the bombsite for the first time in a high-angle point-of-view shot from a back window of the house (fig. 14). The shot takes in not only the waste ground itself, but also the house's small paved backyard and broken wall which demarcate the spatial relation, the proximity, of house and bombsite while at the same time pointing up the barriers between them – window, yard, wall. With the single, significant, exception of the final scene, the bombsite image is subsequently always introduced by this point-of-view shot.

This first bombsite image dissolves to the same scene, now – as Christine's voice over tells us – five years on. Mandy is alone in the backyard, while in the far distance, separated by the wall and a good deal of empty ground, a group of children is noisily at play. The world outside the house and the yard is fraught with peril for Mandy: she follows her little dog out through the back gate, accidentally left open, straight into the path of a lorry (figs 18 and 19).

The same shot appears for a third time following Christine's first visit to the Bishop David School. Mandy, once more alone in the yard, is riding her tricycle around in circles. Three scruffy boys approach the hole in the wall: 'Hey you! Give us a ride!' Mandy, mute and uncomprehending, shrinks back (figs 20–22). 'Stingy! Stingy!', the boys taunt. The next shot reveals that the point of view



Figure 25a



Figure 25b



Figure 25c



Figure 25d

4 The mannikins in a bombed-out shopfront in *London Can Take It* (Humphrey Jennings/Harry Watt, GPO Film Unit for MoI, 1940), for example. In her novel *Memory Board* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), Canadian author Jane Rule describes Blitz-torn London as a place where 'a teapot could as easily be found in the middle of a road as on a kitchen counter'. The script of *Mandy* places the grandparents' house in 'an area showing a contrast of social classes originally an exclusively upper-class district. In the post-war years, however, it has quickly deteriorated. The bomb damage has not been rebuilt and the houses are badly in need of exterior redecoration. The Garland house fights a lonely battle against the general deterioration all round'. *Mandy*, Final Shooting Script, British Film Institute Library.

on this scene has been Harry's (fig. 23): inside the house, the family is discussing Christine's proposal to send Mandy to the school. Harry refuses.

Next time, though, the point of view is Mandy's own. Brought home from school, she is bored and lonely. She wanders into the room where her grandfather is absorbed in solo chess, and looks out of the window at the bombsite and the children at play (fig. 24). A little later, a tracking shot, apparently unmotivated, moves us from inside the backyard and through the open gate, revealing Mandy in long shot from behind, moving tentatively towards the other children (figs 25a, 25b and 25c). She has left the house of her own volition, is making her approach, and will eventually be drawn into the others' game, seen (and heard) by her parents, who have followed her out of the house (figs 26–31). A crane shot then reveals the entire setting in a high-angle extreme long shot, as Mandy runs into the circle of children. As the film ends and cast credits roll, the children resume their game, watched at a distance by Harry and Christine, now reunited (figs 32a and 32b).

The waste ground, it is clear, plays a crucial role in Mandy's story, figuring centrally in her strivings to grow, move beyond the family and make contact with others. If the first step in this direction is made through the mother's agency, it is Mandy herself who pushes things further, naming herself and bridging the gulf between herself and the hearing children. The space beyond the house and the barrier between that which belongs to the house – the yard – and that which belongs to the outside world – the waste ground – become in effect the arena of Mandy's struggle. In order to name herself, become her self, she must first make her passage from the one space to the other. The track through the open gate marks this moment of Mandy's passage and triumph.

As a bombsite, the waste ground obviously acquires a certain verisimilitude with regard to the film's historical moment. At the same time, though, it is an odd – even an uncanny – image, with its strange juxtaposition of grand town house against a wilderness of destruction dotted with noisy, unruly children: it calls to mind those depictions of wartime London that point up the surreal character of the scene.⁴ If the bombsite image refers back to the actuality of war, this is a troubled and a troubling reference, confounding any notions of naturalism or actuality. Moreover, in the context of this particular film, further layers of meaning accrue to the image: it is associated with Mandy's personal struggle against isolation and loneliness; but its connotations also reach outward to embrace issues concerning what it is to be a child – not only at a particular moment in history, but in general. The waste ground, in other words, assumes a mythic quality.

If Mandy's quest – to acquire language and enter society – is that of every child, hers is accorded extra resonance: not merely by



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30

- 5 For another interpretation, see Pam Cook, 'Mandy: daughter of transition', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays. Ninety Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 355–61

virtue of her specialness, her disability; but by the highly charged mise-en-scene of the key moments of that quest. Up till the final scene, the image of the waste ground, with its accompanying distant voices of children at play, is always motivated by, and mediated through, the house. This makes it an object of desire for us as much as for Mandy: and for it to be attained, separation and distancing from the house must take place. And yet what sort of object of desire is a piece of land devastated by war, portrayed as troubling, uncanny even? If this space stands for the future towards which Mandy is striving, then is there not some measure of ambivalence about that future: on the one hand a wasteland of destruction, on the other a *tabula rasa* for the construction of the new; on the one hand encircled by signifiers of the past, on the other clamorous with the life and energy of the young?

The mise-en-scene of the bombsite speaks a preoccupation that, unspoken yet insistent, pervades the entire film: the relation between past and future. It suggests that the future is rooted in the past, that the past will leave its marks on the future. The physical settings of the film's story might appear ugly or scarred, and the older generation flawed in their inability to communicate; and yet the life, joy and energy of the new generation stand in marked contrast to this gloom. *Mandy* is about one child's efforts to overcome a disability and seize life. On another level, it is about every child's quest to move into the world and learn to live with others. If the film also speaks more generally about transcending the drawbacks of an old order by building a new one on its ruins, does this not suggest at least a guarded optimism about the future?⁵ Such a reading assumes some obvious connections between *Mandy* and its historical moment, the years of postwar reconstruction in Britain. *Mandy's* message is historically grounded through an overlaying of the story of one little girl on the one hand by that sense of renewal and possibility always present in the figure of the child, and on the other by a notion of the rebuilding and renewal of a social order.

If a reading of *Mandy* which properly engages the film as text, its social-historical context, and the responses it elicits, eluded my earlier analysis, this is now made possible by attention, on the insistence of the little girl who wants to be heard, to Mandy's story, the child's story. The child Annette urges the adult to reach back into childhood, to trust the naive response and admit it to analysis; to understand that if she allows it to, the film *Mandy* can return her, with an adult's understanding, to the child's world of possibility and loss. The little Annette also shows me, a child of Mandy's generation, how possibility and loss are written into the world my generation inherited; are written into our very expectations, as



Figure 31



Figure 32a



Figure 32b

children coming to consciousness with the traces present all around us of a war we did not experience – traces in our physical surroundings, in our parents' talk, in so many aspects of our everyday lives.

The analytical material of this case history is less a child's response to a film than a child's response admitted to adult memory: for the child's reading returns only in the adult's interpretation. To this extent, film analysis might offer a tentative embrace to 'feeling', to 'naive' response, whilst yet avoiding abandonment to the apparently unanalysable – the immanence of pure emotion, pure experience. If the results are modest, the shift is potentially momentous: memory work presents new possibilities for enhancing our understanding not only of how films work as texts, but also of how we use films and other representations to make our selves, of how we construct our own histories through memory, even of how we position ourselves within wider, more public, histories.

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Daddy's cinema: femininity and mass spectatorship

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[T]his daughter of his took the place of a son and a friend with whom he could exchange thoughts.

Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*

In 'Three Men and Baby M', published in the 'Male Trouble' issue of *Camera Obscura* in 1988, Tania Modleski suggests that a paternity that knows how to love has become something of a preoccupation for both cinema, in films like *Three Men and A Baby* (1988), and for television, in series like *Full House*, 'three men and three little girls', and *My Two Dads*.¹ Noting that the female audiences for these films are 'as amused and deeply touched . . . as men are – probably more so',² Modleski concludes her article with a warning. It is not that cinema is engaged in 'a historically unprecedented, feminist-inspired, and altogether contemporary reconceptualization of the paternal role'.³ Rather:

The fact that in every one of these cases the children reared exclusively by men are female, suggests that the daughters are being seduced *away* from feminism and into a world where they may become so 'dazzled' by the proliferating varieties of paternity that they are unable to see whose interests are really being served.⁴

Modleski's specific reference in this passage is the figure of the imaginary father theorized by Julia Kristeva in *Tales of Love*, a figure supposed to stand against a tendency to describe the so-called contemporary 'malaise' as symptomatic of a decline in paternal

1 Tania Modleski, 'Three Men and Baby M', *Camera Obscura*, no. 17 (1988), p. 80.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 80.

5 Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

6 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London: Abacus, 1980); Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *The Ego Ideal* (London: Free Association Books, 1985).

7 Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 378.

8 Ibid., p. 41.

9 Ibid., p. 46.

authority.⁵ Christopher Lasch, for example, appeals to a more authoritarian paternal structure when he laments the decline of the social superego represented by ‘fathers, teachers and preachers’ and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel gives an account of ‘ideological’ group identity organized around the ‘mother of the pervert’, the mother who allows the son to replace the father.⁶ Against this, Kristeva suggests that there has been

too much stress on the crisis in paternity as cause of psychotic discontent. Beyond the often fierce but artificial and incredible tyranny of the Law and the superego, the crisis in the paternal function that led to a deficiency of psychic space is in fact an erosion of the loving father.⁷

In Kristeva’s reading, the loving father becomes the break on the fusion between the mother–child dyad (and she is perhaps not so far away from Chasseguet-Smirgel at this point), saving the child from abjection in the sense of an auto-erotic submersion that blocks any recognition of a difference between self and other, thus cutting the child off from love and from the social.

The break that Kristeva’s imaginary father puts on a theoretical appeal to the authority of the father is crucial. Nevertheless, we have also to take into account that the loving father represents, or is working as, a *distraction*. That distraction is no doubt necessary because it stands for what the mother desires beyond the infant – ‘The imaginary father would thus be the indication that the mother is not complete but that she wants . . . Who? What? . . . “At any rate, not I”’.⁸ But, like all distractions, this father cuts both ways. What is to stop the object of the mother’s desire becoming not just proof that she desires something other than her child, proof that releases the child into the world, but becoming also the object that ‘dazzles’ or occupies the subject by taking over its fantasy, by presenting itself as the only object that the ‘daughter’ can want?

Or: What could the woman want beyond a loving father? When we ask that question it immediately matters (and this is the strength of Modleski’s political critique) that Kristeva’s imaginary father is still a paternal function and that distraction is being symbolized by a paternity that can always become – and perhaps whether it wants to or not – seductive or even perverse. Kristeva, in fact, puts the question ‘seducer or ideal father’⁹ to her imaginary construct, a question that Modleski’s reading of *Three Men and a Baby* answers by invoking the category of the father-as-pervert. This film, she suggests, marginalizes the woman both as the object of heterosexual desire and as a mother:

This Peter Pan fantasy (*about* a man named Peter, and brought to us by Walt Disney) even incorporates a kind of Wendy figure at the end, a woman who is not (or not any longer) the object of any

man's desire but part of the group which gets to play perpetually with the baby.¹⁰

The film's status as a sentimental comedy sustains its representation of a paedophilic desire 'to freeze the life process so that the object will not outgrow the desire' – the freeze frame of the baby at the end of the film – while the fathers 'refuse to grow up', an infantilization of culture that is matched by a sexualization of the infantile which gives rise to what Modleski describes as 'some shockingly voyeuristic shots . . . of the baby's genitals' and to a film 'laden with jokes about a female baby as an adequate object of sexual desire for three ageing bachelors (for example, when Jack takes a shower with her) . . .'.¹¹

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–5.

A feeling of unease or distress at these images, or at their pleasures, is indissociable from the trauma that feminist attention to the prevalence of child sexual abuse has presented us with. On the one hand, in the social context of sexual abuse, the image of a baby presented as an 'adequate object of desire' to a man brings us up against a persistent question for film theory about the relation between cinema and the social. On the other hand, Modleski's insistence that this perversity is aimed not only at the daughters *inside* these narratives of loving fathers, of fathers loving daughters, but also at the daughters *outside* looking on, recalls and reinflects the figure of the female spectator that has so frequently dominated feminist engagement with the question of identification in cinema. To put this slightly differently: when a perverse paternal function finds its way into cinema, it constitutes the spectator as a daughter, as the daughter of a paternity which does its work somewhere beyond cinema by disarticulating the woman from her 'interests', seducing her away from a feminism which then comes to stand for the woman's identification beyond the father. When cinema takes on a paternal function and invests itself in narratives of a loving paternity, it demonstrates a perversity linked to a degraded and self-violating identification with the father, an identification beyond the 'interests' of the daughter which dispossesses the spectator of her identity.

There is a terrifying logic to this father who when he loves becomes both seductive and violating, presenting us with a cinema that assumes paternity via a perversity that goes beyond the voyeurism or fetishism of looking. Crucially, it is a logic that forces us to think about social and sexual identifications in cinema together because when she describes the position of the female spectator as the effect of a more or less disturbing relation to a paternal instance, Modleski allows us to start to articulate the category of the feminine spectator with the psychoanalytic category of the feminine superego – the agency proposed by Freud to account for women's 'demanding' relation to the father and their degraded relation to the

12 Sigmund Freud, 'Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes', in *On Sexuality*, Pelican Freud Vol. 7, trans James Strachey. (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 342.

13 Sigmund Freud, 'The dissolution of the Oedipus Complex', in *On Sexuality*, p. 321.

14 Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), p. 129.

15 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 119. 'For the fact that women are "weaker in their social interests" is obvious. The ambiguity, the double meaning, of that expression makes further comment unnecessary.'

16 Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its discontents', in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Pelican Freud Vol. 12, trans James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 320.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

social. 'I cannot evade the notion', Freud wrote in 1925, '(though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men'.¹² In the classical Freudian schema, this difference is taken back to the fact that the woman lacks not only a penis but the narcissistic investment in the penis that mobilizes the masculine and social submission to the paternal prohibition against incest. If the woman ever does give up her infantile love objects, Freud suggested in 'The dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' in 1924, it will be the result of 'upbringing and of intimidation from outside which threatens her with a loss of love'.¹³ More typically, the daughter continues to make a 'real' demand for love on the father who thereby remains a pressing reality in the life of the daughter. 'In these circumstances', Freud concluded in 1933, 'the formation of the feminine super-ego must suffer; it cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its cultural significance, and feminists are not pleased when we point out to them the effects of this factor upon the average feminine character'.¹⁴

Freud's reference to the feminists anticipates the difficulty that the description of the feminine superego has presented to a feminism that turns to psychoanalysis for a description of the woman's relation to the social bond. For now, I want to note that the feminine superego *suffers* – and, recalling Luce Irigaray, to keep the ambiguity of that expression.¹⁵ It is a suffering that suggests a link between the feminine and the mass superego described by Freud in 'Civilization and its discontents' in 1933. In this schema, the infantile ego directs an original aggression against a parental authority that demands renunciation of an instinctual satisfaction. The infant's biological vulnerability turns that aggression into anxiety, into the fear of being abandoned and left to die that becomes the prototype of the social anxiety that Freud distinguished from a proper, masculine (and guilty) identification with the social. 'First', Freud insists,

comes renunciation of instinct owing to fear of aggression by the *external* authority. (This is, of course, what fear of the loss of love amounts to, for love is a protection against this punitive aggression.) After that comes the erection of an *internal* authority, and renunciation of instinct owing to fear of it – owing to fear of conscience.¹⁶

For Freud, both women and the masses fail to reach this second stage: '[I]n many adults . . . it [social anxiety] has only changed to the extent that the place of the father or the two parents is taken by the larger human community'.¹⁷ The masses are social in the sense that they respond to a fear of retribution from the other, just as the

girl will only be induced to give up her incestuous love objects by a threat from the outside. The mass and the feminine are thereby mapped onto one another as a degraded form of social identification and, though it amounts to the same thing, as a traumatized relation to the paternal function. It is the fear of death that gives rise to a demand to be loved by the father and we can say both that the daughter becomes the prototype of the anxious mass subject and that the feminine demand for love on the father is a desire for proof that the daughter is not going to be left to die.

Freud's description of the subject's relation to the social as an identification with the father, or rather with the father's prohibition against incest, marks both the feminine and the mass as anxious instances of the failure of such an identification. That failure traces a logic of social dispossession that has structured an account of both the feminine and the mass spectator in film theory. If we read across from Tania Modleski in the 1980s to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer writing out of the Frankfurt School in the 1940s, we can see that the mass and the feminine, the social and the sexual, come together in film theory in the figure of the dazzled or occupied spectator, a figure associated both with a legacy of cultural pessimism attaching to mass cultural forms and a feminist analysis of the possible identifications available to the female spectator – variously, masochistic, masculine or marginal.¹⁸

Adorno and Horkheimer's famous denunciation of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* turns cinematic looking into a form of dereliction, with spectators unequivocally the victims of what they see: 'the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality'.¹⁹ This remains one of their most serious charges against cinema – that the cinematic image reproduces and affirms 'things as they are' while the spectator becomes the mutilated realization of an industrialization of consciousness that reproduces the capitalist relations of production by 'occupying men's senses' at the most intimate level of fantasy, an occupation that destroys fantasy by making identification, as the wish to be like, impossible. 'Of course', the authors note in 'The culture industry as mass deception',

the starlet is meant to symbolize the typist in such a way that the splendid evening dress seems meant for the actress as distinct from the real girl. The girls in the audience not only feel that they could be on the screen, but realize the great gulf separating them from it. Only one girl can draw the lucky ticket, only one man can win the prize, and if, mathematically, all have the same chance, yet this is so infinitesimal for each one that he or she will do best to write it off and rejoice in the other's success, which might just as well have been his or hers, and somehow never is. Whenever the culture industry still issues an invitation naively to identify, it is immediately withdrawn. No one can escape from himself any

¹⁸ Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately seeking difference', *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 1 (1987), p. 48.

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), p. 126.

20 Ibid., p. 145.

more. Once a member of the audience could see his own wedding in the one shown in the film. Now the lucky actors on the screen are copies of the same category as every member of the public, but such equality only demonstrates the insurmountable separation of the human elements. The perfect similarity is the absolute difference.²⁰

Rather than fantasmatic identification, rather than escapism, the experience of the cinema described in this passage familiarizes the mass spectator with the vagaries of chance against which there is no appeal and before which no one is special, no one makes any difference. There is no identification, or rather, no 'naive' identification, because there is too much recognition. When everyone is the same, identification with the image on the screen in the name of a desire to be like them gives way before the realization that the image is standing in for the spectator. The girl's fantasy has no place beyond the act of seeing the image in herself and then recognizing its absolute difference by giving up the fantasy of ever being like or ever being chosen. This is not a fetishistic way of looking – 'I know, but all the same . . .' – because there is no escape other than into a kind of altruism – 'rejoice in the other's success' – a form of social bonding that undoes fantasy, bringing it, disappointed, into the service of social reality or social resignation.

That resignation becomes the catastrophe of the culture industry for the Frankfurt School because the cinematic image destroys fantasy while at the same time securing pleasure. Just before their description of identification in the cinema, Adorno and Horkheimer assert the 'original affinity of business and amusement', the task of amusement being to 'defend society':

To be pleased means to say Yes Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.²¹

21 Ibid., p. 144.

Cinema, as an occupying force, skews the subject's relation to pleasure, or rather makes pleasure the same as the death drive insofar as that drive aims not at aggression but at an absence of stimulation. The charge that cinema turns pleasure into death by mobilizing a conformist social fantasy cuts across any distinction between mass and avant-garde film – in 1944, Adorno and Horkheimer make partial exceptions only of the 'grotesques and the funnies' – and puts the death drive on the side of a massified social made secure against affect.

There is a description of a social tie embedded in these passages, one that recalls Freud's account of the libidinal bond forged from renounced envy in 'Group psychology and the analysis of the ego'.

22 Sigmund Freud, 'Group psychology and the analysis of the ego', in *Civilization, Society and Religion*, p. 152.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

24 Theodor Adorno, 'Transparencies in film', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, J. M. Bernstein (ed.), (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 154.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Freud emphasizes the role of equality in his pessimistic, if not cynical, etiology of a social justice derived from envy and scarcity: 'No one must want to put himself forward, every one must be the same and have the same. Social justice means that we deny ourselves many things so that others may have to do without them as well.'²² In Freud's text, too, we read the description of the social bond through (female) spectatorship – a 'troop of women and girls' crowding enthusiastically around a singer or pianist who, rather than indulging in the rivalrous jealousy that the occasion would seem to demand, 'in the face of their numbers and the consequent impossibility of their reaching the aim of their love, they renounce it'. Rather than 'pulling out one another's hair', they identify with one another 'by means of a similar love for the same object'.²³ Identification *with* or *as* the social displaces identification as wish-fulfilment for these spectators, a social identification that always calls up the figure of the Father in Freud's theory.

In 'Transparencies on film', published in 1966, Adorno linked the occupying force of mainstream cinema to a regressive paternal function. Almost conceding the possibility of a critical cinema associated with the Oberhausen group (and thus with the film theory and practice of his friend and associate, Alexander Kluge), Adorno differentiated between critical and mass film by making a distinction between two kinds of feminine beauty:

While in autonomous art anything lagging behind the already established technical standard does not rate, *vis-à-vis* the culture industry – whose standard excludes everything but the predigested and the already integrated, just as the cosmetic trade eliminates facial wrinkles – works which have not completely mastered their technique, conveying as a result something consolingly uncontrolled and accidental, have a liberating quality. In them the flaws of a pretty girl's complexion become the corrective to the immaculate face of the professional star.²⁴

That distinction is then mapped onto the generational polemics that characterized the clash between the Oberhausen group and the mainstream film industry, between 'Kiddy's Cinema' and 'Daddy's Cinema', the mass 'trash' dismissed by Adorno for the immaturity of its experience 'acquired during the adolescence of the medium'. 'What is repulsive about Daddy's Cinema', he continues, 'is its infantile character, regression manufactured on an industrial scale'.²⁵ The temporal contortions of this passage describe a cinema that assumes a paternal function and then regresses – not only to adolescence but to an infantilism that is repulsive because it suggests a debasement of the paternal function, even its perversion, in the famous polymorphous sexuality of infancy. Something about cinema seduces the paternal function and its spectators into infantilism and into a social identification that overwhelms the subject into

26 Ibid., pp. 158–9.

resignation and conformity via its 'models for collective behaviour':

It is undeniable that Daddy's Cinema indeed corresponds to what the consumers want, or, perhaps, rather that it provides them with an unconscious canon of what they do not want, that is, something different from what they are presently being fed.²⁶

At stake is a mass degradation of fantasy and the social, a degradation that is clarified by the way in which a recuperation of that fantasmatic social space becomes the object of Alexander Kluge's film theory and practice. Without attempting a comprehensive reading of Kluge's complex cultural and political theory or of his filmmaking, it is worth drawing attention to the way that his critique of contemporary cinema exemplifies a way of thinking about mass or mainstream cinema as a degradation of the capacity for fantasy. In an interview with Stuart Liebman in 1988, Kluge commented:

I cannot really say that *Out of Africa* is not directed at escapism and *Rambo* clearly has little to do with real experience. Rather it is a stylization of the feelings of omnipotence of an eight-year-old . . . [it] shows the omnipotence of men. *Rambo* is a gruesome way of expressing fantasies of omnipotence. That is, so to speak, what the movies are . . . the cinema has slid down into 'kids' pictures'. I say this not as a critic but because one must understand this change.²⁷

27 Stuart Liebman, 'On New German Cinema, art, enlightenment, and the public sphere: an interview with Alexander Kluge', *October*, no. 46 (1988), pp. 26–7.

There is something totalizing about the charge against popular film that rests uneasily alongside Kluge's disarming 'I say this not as a critic'. It is as if the other side of Kluge's project for a critical cinema that aims at the productive force of the spectator is an account of the mass spectator as, above all, and suspiciously, readable:

They suffer, they experience cognitive dissonance when they perceive how they live. If I feel myself as the producer of my life, then I am unhappy. So I would rather be a spectator of my life. I would rather change my life this way since I cannot change it in society. So at night I see films that are different from my experiences during the day. Thus there is a strict separation between experience and the cinema. That is the obstacle for our films. For we are people of the '60s and we do not believe in the opposition between experience and fiction.²⁸

28 Ibid., p. 27, my italics.

Despite this readability, the slide between pronouns – from 'they' to 'I' to 'we' – underlines the difficulty of locating a place from which to speak about a suffering which 'they' endure, with which 'I', via that 'if', can identify and that 'we', via a critical cinema, want to oppose. 'Our films' confront two objects – spectatorship as a strategy for warding off misery and a form of cinematic fantasy

²⁹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, 'Selections from *The Public Sphere and Experience*', trans. Peter Labanyi, *October*, no. 46 (1988), p. 76.

that is mutilated by its separation from reality. Escapist or omnipotent fantasy, fantasy that Kluge ascribes to films as diverse as *Out of Africa* (1985) and *Rambo* (1985), moves in as a response to the failure of the political and cultural imagination. The separation between 'experience and fiction', 'experience and cinema', suggests that even the 'relation of dependency between fantasy and the experience of alienated reality'²⁹ has been disrupted. That disruption deprives fantasy of one of the crucial political functions Kluge ascribes to it as a form of inverted and critical consciousness in relation to the real, a relation that a critical practice can grasp and expose.

What could be called the 'truth value' of fantasy as critique is subject to two limitations in Kluge's reading – though it should be said that he is still using the category of escapist fantasy to read off an account of social impotence and alienation. First, its mode of production disrupts the dependent relation between fantasy and experience. While 'by virtue of its mode of production, fantasy represents an unconscious practical criticism of alienation', it also tends to 'distance itself from the alienated labour process and to translate itself into timeless and ahistorical modes of production'. In other words, in Kluge's account, fantasy is provoked as a defense against the external world and the very success of its defense, its 'flight' from that world, tends to transform engaged critique into a form of destruction of the subject's relation to representation and to reality. Fantasy threatens to 'prevent the worker from representing his interests in reality' by seducing him into an imaginary that does not, and cannot, exist.³⁰

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 71–80.

But this is not the crucial limitation because the turn away from reality is overcome by a tendency for fantasies 'once they have reached a certain distance from reality, to turn around and face up to real situations'.³¹ The pressure of the 'real' prevails because the very success of the fantasy, its diminution of what Kluge describes as the 'nightmarish quality' of alienated reality, turns it back to that reality. In a sense, fantasy 'holds' or 'contains' reality, fashions it in accordance with a logic of tolerability that comes back to those 'interests', at once so suspiciously obvious and so elusive, and to a question about what the worker wants. The second limitation on fantasy and the real threat to its return to reality, a threat exemplified by mainstream cinema, is the consciousness industry:

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

The existence of the subliminal activity of human consciousness – which, owing to its neglect hitherto by bourgeois interests and the public sphere, represents a partly autonomous mode of experience for the working class – is today threatened because it is precisely the workings of fantasy that constitute the raw material and the medium for the expansion of the consciousness industry.³²

³² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

That expansion works both through fantasies of omnipotence and

through regression that come together in the representation of masculinity as both infantile and omnipotent when Kluge locates *Rambo* as the exemplary example not only of a new cinematic and political brutality but of a fantasy of masculinity that effectively excludes women from cinema. Kluge describes the female spectator as one who is de-identified with what takes place on the screens of mainstream cinema. Not only, he suggests, does women's fear of rape keep them out of the public space of cinema but the films are 'too coarse' for women:

Why would they look at *Rambo* when they want their feelings to be treated gently? These are films for young men, not for women at all. The identifications do not work this way.³³

Two points can be made here. First, there is a remarkable circulation of terms between Kluge's account of mainstream cinema and Thomas Doherty's description of American International Pictures' (AIP) exploitation code drawn up in the mid-1960s and described as 'The Peter Pan Syndrome'. This is, in effect, Kluge's account of a cinema that has succumbed to 'kid's pictures', to masculinity and to an exploitation code:

- a) a younger child will watch anything an older child will watch;
- b) an older child will not watch anything a younger child will watch;
- c) a girl will watch anything a boy will watch;
- d) a boy will not watch anything a girl will watch; therefore,
- e) to catch your greatest audience you zero in on the 19-year-old male.³⁴

In *Teenagers and Teenpics*, Doherty accounts for this so-called 'juvenilization of cinema' in terms of Hollywood film studios' fear that the adult and family viewing markets, on which cinema could rely before the 1950s, had been irrevocably captured by television. As a means of securing its audience, cinema turned to the adolescent as consumer, and specifically to the male adolescent.³⁵

Secondly, when young men become the privileged objects of cinema, masculinity is differentiated from the infantile, from the familial and from the feminine. This privilege is, however, indissociable from debasement insofar as the young male spectators end up on the side of the regression and illusion that this cinema is supposed to demand. It is the female spectator who escapes illusion but if at this point Kluge disarticulates the feminine from the mass, constructing an alliance between the female and the critical spectator in the name of a different kind of cinema, he does so only by producing femininity as cliché – the cliché of women who want their feelings treated gently. The corollary of a young and violent masculinity is the passive, and possibly familial, woman dispossessed of cinema and of fantasies of omnipotence, a dispossession that

³³ Liebman, 'On New German Cinema, art, enlightenment and the public sphere', pp. 29–30.

³⁴ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilisation of American Movies in the 1950s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 157.

³⁵ Ibid., especially chapters 1–3.

closes down a question about *feminine identifications* with, or pleasure in, representations of violence.

There are problems with Kluge's reading of cinema, not least the tendency of that reading to lose sight of the need for historical, cultural and political differentiation in the analysis of mainstream films that can so easily be run together and dismissed. The appeal to sexual difference and to the violence of the *Rambo* example in Kluge's account also tends to occlude a question about the link between fantasies of omnipotence and the psychical and social debasement, or dispossession, ascribed to the spectators of mass film. Specifically, it occludes the possibility that a fantasy of omnipotence could come under the guise of tenderness or of love, a guise that takes us back to the beginning of this paper and to Modleski's account of a female spectator at risk from the representation of a loving paternity. But, and critically, Kluge (and Adorno and Horkheimer) are addressing the fact that cinema not only dazzles but *occupies* fantasy and they make that occupation indissociable from its social effects. In the rest of this paper, I want to read this description with and against what has become something of a critical commonplace about one popular trend in 'youth' cinema (the so-called 'brat-pack' films) in the 1980s. This cinema, it is said, effects the death of oppositional fantasy through its representation of a more or less loving paternal function.

Addressing not only cinematic representation *as* adolescent but cinematic representation *of* adolescence as a privileged point of resistance to social conformity, Mark Spratt has commented: 'The trend in the representation of teenagers in films of the early 1980s has been largely a conformity to mindless pursuits of partying, fun, sexual fantasies as well as security and money, all prior to rather than in opposition to entering the establishment'.³⁶ His question, 'Is *Easy Rider* dead?', stands as a forceful repudiation of what Kathryn Flett calls the 'perfect cinematic formula for the mid-Eighties'³⁷ – the 'brat-pack film' most frequently associated with the work of director and producer, John Hughes. Hughes has been described as one of the most successful directors of the 1980s – from *Sixteen Candles* (1984), through *The Breakfast Club* (1984) and *Weird Science* (1985) to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986) and, more recently, *Home Alone* (1990). Above all, Hughes's cinema pays attention to adolescence in a way that could not be further from Kluge's dis-ease with 'an audience of people twelve to eighteen years old, which is not the social group who are the proprietors of *Lebenserfahrung* (life experience)'.³⁸

Hughes's cinema is associated not only with a cinema of facile and materialistic conservatism but with the representation of a paternal function that is 'too loving'. 'Up against a parent culture that is ever

³⁶ Mark Spratt, 'Rebels, rumbles and motorcycle boys', *Cinema Papers*, vol. 48 (1984), p. 309.

³⁷ Kathryn Flett, 'Hollywood's Golden Girl', *The Face*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1989), p. 17.

³⁸ Liebman, 'On New German Cinema, art, enlightenment and the public sphere', p. 29.

more accommodating and appeasing', Thomas Doherty writes, a parent culture that is:

ever less authoritative and overbearing (not to mention present), the teenage rebel faces a problem the Wild One never anticipated. The parental and principal villains in teenpics like *Risky Business* or *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* are overdrawn caricatures, no real threat, played for laughs. One of the most fascinating undertones of teenpics since the 1960s is their palpable desire for parental control and authority, not adolescent independence and freedom.³⁹

Why are these films dismissed as set-pieces of teenage indulgence ('the characters drone on about themselves and their puerile problems en route to emerging as fully paid-up members of the Me Generation'⁴⁰), as a death threat to the spirit of *Easy Rider* (1969), their viewers equated with the 'Simple-Minded Set'?⁴¹ There is a paradox that derives from a disjuncture between the easy wish-fulfilment that this cinema is supposed to represent and the persecutory affect that it generates in and for a film criticism that almost seems to lament a refusal to locate a sufficiently persecutive authority. That refusal constitutes a spectator dispossessed of rebellious protest or, even, of his or her own 'interests'. That is if we lose persecution, if we lose the 'real threat', then we lose oppositional identity. There can be no rebellion in the name of freedom because the subject of this logic can only want what it doesn't have, or, and more miserably, have what it doesn't want. Desire is both fixated – locked in opposition *to* – and subject to an interminable oscillation that makes it virtually impossible to locate anything like pleasure for this account. That impossibility manifests itself in a cinema that can be situated between the cultural and political practices opposed by the Frankfurt School and the debased and loving, debased because lovingly perverse, paternity described by Tania Modleski. It is as if a cinema supposedly given over to pleasure – to the hedonism of the 'I want it now' generation – simultaneously represents a death threat to pleasure and to fantasy.

But where do we start to look for a death threat in one of John Hughes's most popular films, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? Described variously as a teenage Rocky, a fantasmatic superhero, a 'delightful fellow' who 'screws over anyone who gets in his way',⁴² Ferris fakes illness and arranges a day off school for himself, his girlfriend, Sloan, and his best friend, Cameron. He dupes his indulgent parents and the suspicious high-school principal, Rooney. Together with Rooney's vindictiveness, Ferris's sister's (Jeannie) jealousy constantly threatens to expose Ferris's schemes and disrupt the day out in Chicago, a day that includes Ferris's impersonation of the 'Sausage King of Chicago' in an exclusive restaurant, a 'near miss' when Ferris's father arrives for a business lunch at the same place

³⁹ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, p. 237.

⁴⁰ Review of *The Breakfast Club* (1984) in Tom Milne (ed.), *The Time Out Film Guide* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

and ends with Cameron trashing his father's prized Ferrari borrowed, on Ferris's insistence, for the trip. Despite Ferris's offer to take the blame, Cameron decides to use the accident to stand up to his materialist parents; or, as a film critic for *Time Out* puts it: 'Hughes revels in Ferris's ingenuity, then neatly adds dimension after a ninety-minute parade of hubris and material wealth by telling us that people count more than their possessions'.⁴³ Back home, Ferris is confronted by Rooney on his door step but 'saved' by Jeannie who has had a change of heart towards him after an encounter with a beautiful delinquent (Charlie Sheen). As the youth arrested for drugs who meets Jeannie in the police station, Sheen imports – notably from his role in Penelope Spheeris's *The Boys Next Door* (1985) – the disturbance of a violent asociality largely absent from Hughes's film. This encounter is in effect the film's nod to the teen violence films that are the other side of the brat-pack tradition and the sexuality allowed to emerge in this scene, however minimally, reconciles Jeannie to her brother: 'Your problem is not your brother. Your problem's you.'

On the one hand, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* stands as a key example of a cinema that colludes with a representation of youth rebellion as nothing more than a series of tricks and revels in parental and personal wealth and status. The film then takes on the imaginative poverty, the materialism and the reactionary politics of which not only this cinema but its consumers stand accused – that is, 'Thatcher's children', or rather, the children of a political and cultural exchange between Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. On the other hand, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* returns us to the question that Kristeva, and then Modleski, put to the category of the imaginary father: Is he a seducer, an ideal or a pervert?

Ferris Bueller's Day Off stages that question through its presentation of a paternal function that oscillates between love and perversion. The refusal to locate paternity in the visible *image* of the father – Lasch's 'fathers, teachers and preachers' – gives way before a desire to relocate that function in what has been described as the privileged object of mainstream cinema – adolescent masculinity. How, and perhaps if, that relocation takes place depends on how seriously we take one of the film's most ambiguous jokes. The day out, and Ferris's narrative omnipotence, depends on his being able to outwit the authorities and get his girlfriend out of school. To do this, he ends up pretending that there has been a death in Sloan's family and masquerading as her father. Under the eyes of Rooney, he waits for Sloan at the entrance to the school and asks her for the kiss that could be described as the film's symptom; or, as the symptom of the paternity that the film invests: 'Do you have a kiss for daddy?'.

It is Rooney's look that registers this exchange as incestuous perversity: 'So that's how it is in their family'. Rooney's surprised

indifference both draws attention to and normalizes the incestuous play that structures the joke, the play that the joke in fact insists on – ‘So *that’s* how it is in their family’. Inflected as adolescent play, perversity is framed first by the spectator’s look, a ‘knowing’ look that denies perversity, and then by Rooney’s ‘mistaken’ look. Rooney confirms and misrecognizes perversity, a confirmation and misrecognition that figure the debasement of an authority that is deluded.

It is a joke that is extended to, or turned round on, the spectator at the end of the film. We keep watching the credits which come up over Rooney’s ride home in a schoolbus and, immediately afterwards, Ferris comes back on the screen to address the spectator as he has done throughout the film: ‘You’re still here? It’s over. Go home. Go!’ It is a device reminiscent of a Brechtian aesthetic, a defamiliarization that draws attention to the film as a fictional construct and disrupts the spectator’s identification with what has taken place on screen. But we have to ask: In the name of what does this disruption take place? First, because these last frames tend to remove Ferris from the confines of the narrative, a removal that underlines both his omnipotence and his authority. Second, his question ends with an impatient command, or prohibition – ‘Go home’. Ferris is suddenly no longer playing to, or in collusion with, the spectator. Instead he has set a limit so that the spectator is made guilty of transgressing a law he or she should have known about, is made guilty of going too far: ‘You’re still here?’

It is a charge that has haunted Ferris throughout the film and is now being displaced onto the spectator. It is the spectator who has asked too much, has gone too far, has, in a way, violated something. The fact that Ferris is only half-dressed reinforces the sense that this violation is sexual. His partial nudity refers back to an earlier sequence in the film when Ferris is in the shower. That sequence draws attention to the naked male body and to the spectator’s invited and disallowed look when Ferris places his hand against the camera lens as it moves down to his genitals. In its oscillation between seduction and refusal, the scene constructs a tantalized and demanding spectator, a spectator who, in the final frames of the film, is tantalized into making a demand that goes too far, that in fact goes beyond the space and temporality of cinema and drifts into the real: ‘You’re still here?’

What is this demand? First, it is the demand made on Ferris/Matthew Broderick that ends up in a space culturally coded as feminine and adolescent, the space in which the beautiful (male) faces of cinema and pop music are commodified as fantasy for young women.⁴⁴ We can note that the adoring female fan is there in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* in the form of the sister overwhelmed by another privileged (because delinquent and drug-addicted) masculinity played by Charlie Sheen – usually marketed both for his looks and

⁴⁴ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 154; Sarra Shaw, ‘She is beyond good and evil – the female as consumer and producer of popular music’, forthcoming in *Watermelon* (1992).

as a son (of Martin Sheen) and brother (of Emilio Estevez). But if *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* figures the problem of female spectatorship through the sister who, like the spectator at the end of the film, takes on guilt – she, and not Ferris, is the problem – the film also seems to evoke the spectator–daughter as a way of mediating between a problem in the category of the spectator and the presentation of the lovingly perverse ‘father’. The spectator who asks too much is like the daughter and the feminized masses who make a more or less desperate demand for love on the father. The final frames of the film seem to stage a relation to Cinema-as-Father and the distracted, craving spectator it solicits.

If we read that cinema and its spectators through a psychoanalytic and critical theory that addresses group psychology, it is clear that in so far as cinema is a site of social identification, it must also be a site of the Fathers (and there are many in Freud). Those cinematic Fathers demand from us, from the spectators, identifications that are not only masculine or feminine, mass or critical, but filial, superegoic and dispossessing. It is that dispossession that brings us up against a question about the death threat (to fantasy) that may inhabit the distractions of cinema, a death threat that, like Freud’s daughters, the spectator takes on as a demand for love.

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Family dramas: film and modernity in Thailand

ANNETTE HAMILTON

In this paper I will discuss the popular Thai film genre known as *nang chiwit*, or 'film of life'. Films of this type are invariably set in the modern world, generally from the period of World War II to the present, and offer a startling contrast to the Chinese 'historical romances' equally popular in Thailand, with their magical and mystical encounters, enchanted swords, disappearing heroines, ghosts and mass martial arts spectacles. *Nang chiwit*, which I will for convenience simply call 'dramas', focus usually on a female character embedded in a complex familial and romantic situation, from which she finally extricates herself to a happy ending but only after a personal sacrifice. The stylistics of these films are, by contemporary western standards, melodramatic, and the western viewer is often uncomfortable with the *Sturm und Drang* which inevitably accompanies the intensely emotional encounters, the unlikelihood of the coincidences through which the plots are propelled, the close focus on the face and gaze of the major characters, and the intricate web of events underlying the narrative which sometimes even the characters themselves have trouble understanding. In some measure this genre combines certain elements of the soap opera and the Hollywood dramas of the 1940s (in the Joan Crawford–Bette Davis style). However, the significance of the genre lies in its interpretation within the frameworks of modern Thai society, from which the narrative and characters take their cultural specificity and which make the genre intensely attractive to Thai audiences, particularly women. Although Thai dramas have been made, in more or less similar style, since the

1 See also the analysis by Gerard Fouquet, 'Le cinéma thai contemporain, 1970-1988', unpublished doctoral thesis (Paris: Université de Paris, 1988). This is the only other discussion of Thai cinema outside of Thai language sources that I am aware of.

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Tsvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 80-1, 83.

postwar period, a flood of them appeared in the mid to late 1980s, along with a number of other films of similar style but supposedly based on real-life stories. I will focus here on the classic *nang chiwit*, since the other form will be considered in a separate paper. What differentiates the two is the very definite sense in which the classic *nang chiwit* is fictional, although both are equally melodramatic.¹

By identifying this film style as melodrama I do not want to diminish its significance to the Thai audience. The western classification of melodrama can only exist against a notion of realist narrative conventions: a drama is distinguished from a melodrama by the assumption that the latter does not represent the way events would 'really' unfold, but instead compresses, expands and enhances the moments of conflict, excitement, fear and disturbance in such a way as to over-represent them. Interestingly, the original concept of melodrama came from a musical play. In Thailand there is a popular theatrical performance known as *likay* which precisely fits this model: it tells a familiar dramatic narrative largely through song and music, although it is also farcical and comic and makes references to current events and scandals. *Likay*, however, has little or nothing in common with the film drama.

These performance and cinematic genres must be seen as sociohistorically constructed. I will suggest here that the popularity of the Thai drama, with all its melodramatic qualities, stems from the way in which it permits representations of familial conflicts arising from the conditions of contemporary modernity. Bakhtin argued that the structures and conventions of the nineteenth-century European novel were

conditioned by a moment of breach in the history of European humanity: the breach by which it emerges from a socially closed and semipatriarchal state, to enter new circumstances that promote international and interlinguistic links and relations.

Every genre has its methods, its ways of seeing and understanding reality, and these methods are its exclusive characteristic The artist must learn to see reality through the eyes of the genre.²

In contrast to the epic, Bakhtin saw the novel as 'the genre of an imperfect, incomplete world', arising from the need to express a new sensibility, inherently iconoclastic. The novel was the classic form associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe: this paper will explore the notion that in Thailand it is the 'drama' film, rather than the novel, which has taken on this role. Through film, the experience of modernity is articulated by focusing on the personal dilemmas of members of a rising new class. Film in America in the 1930s could be seen in a similar light, but differences arise from the fact that in Thailand the pre-modern, against which modernity is being culturally brought forth, was basically a feudal

hierarchical social order whose parameters could be seen almost in terms of caste-like social strata. In Thai drama, the conflicts and confusions of modernity are represented in the relations between the sexes and the generations: typically, through a dynamic of love, error, guilt, reparation and redemption as the individual struggles with the consequences of pre-modern gender, social and familial relations, articulated above all through the problem of family property.

To characterize this film form as 'melodrama' suggests a comparison with western theatrical melodramas of the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which also permitted new perspectives on 'social problems' to be presented to a popular audience, around issues such as illegitimacy, prostitution, marital breakdown and so on. However, in part because of the technical possibilities of film itself, and in part because of the very great seriousness with which the audience regards these films, the comparison is not entirely apt. Nevertheless, melodrama in the West was seen as a popular form and regarded askance by educated people. Similarly, most intellectuals in Thailand despise *nang chiwit* because of its focus on bourgeois wealthy families, when the real lives of ordinary people, the farmers and slum-dwellers, so seldom receive any cinematic attention. When they do so, as in several famous instances (most recently, *The Elephant Keeper* [1990]) they fail utterly at the box office.³

This analysis is one component of a broader study of media and modernity in Thailand which I have been carrying out at various times since 1986. The study includes film, video and television, and seeks to understand the role of media in Thailand's rapid social and economic transformations at national, provincial and rural levels. Essential to my understanding of these films, and their broader context, have been numerous viewing experiences and conversations with Thai people of all kinds of background (educated urban intellectuals, provincial functionaries, small-town businesspeople and illiterate villagers), while selected recent films have been closely translated, contextualized and analysed with the assistance of Mrs Tippawan Tampusana Abold in Hua Hin town, and Mrs Parnee Stoddard in Sydney, both of whom I wish to thank here.

Film and narrative in Thailand

It is impossible to discuss the relation between film and modernity in Thailand without having at least some understanding of the history of film in Thailand, of its relation to other narrative forms, the impact of western narrative in Thailand, and the role of film in popular culture. A full discussion is not possible here, however, and I will merely highlight some of the main features which affect the way in which the drama genre may be interpreted.

³ I have discussed some of the reasons for this in 'Cinema and nation: dilemmas of representation in Thailand', to appear in *East-West Film Journal*, Honolulu.

4 For reference to the history of cinema in Thailand see *ibid.*, and also Fouquet, 'le cinéma thai contemporain'.

5 See Annette Hamilton, 'Rumours, foul calumnies and the safety of the State', in Craig J. Reynolds (ed.), *National Identity and its Defenders: Thailand 1939-1989* (Melbourne: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia No. 25, 1991).

6 Setaphorn Cusripituck et al., *Communication Policies in Thailand: A Study Report* (Bangkok: UNESCO, 1985).

Thailand's reception of cinema was early and enthusiastic. The first film was shown in 1886; Japanese-made films were shown in 1904, while the first cinema was built by a Japanese investor in 1905. Commercial imports of foreign films began in Bangkok between 1916 and 1919.⁴ Films were at first shown without sound, accompanied by music from drums and horns. In 1922 *The Three Musketeers* was shown as a serial requiring forty-eight reels of film. A film magazine published a Thai version of the story in instalments, and subsequently a number of other popular film narratives appeared in the same way. Cinema houses began to commission Thai writers to translate film scripts into booklets to be shown before the show. The melodramatic love story quickly became the most popular form in the 1920s. However, not all people could read, and furthermore the distinction between 'truth' and 'fiction' was not widely understood. With translations from western films, this may not have mattered; but when Thai writers began to compose fictions this caused some consternation. Until the late 1880s there had never been an example of purely fictional prose in Siamese writing. Thai readers were already accustomed to Chinese mythic/historic tales, although these were generally interpreted as 'true stories'. When western popular (rather than classic) writing was translated the hitherto lacking space of fictional representation emerged.⁵

While literacy was fostered early in Thailand, the majority of provincial and rural people could not read narratives easily and, until a generation or so ago, most women could not read at all. Hence access to film provided for the relatively less educated, and for most women, their primary access to fictional narratives on the western model. There was a steady flow of foreign films into Thailand; prior to the 1960s the main sources were the United States, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, Japan and India. However, in recent years, by far the largest number come from the United States, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Indian film is much less popular (except for certain serial productions) and film from the United Kingdom or Europe is virtually never commercially released. Today, most film imports come through major groups in Hong Kong such as Denlon, Continental and Intercontinental, and some make vast profits, especially those starring Stallone or Schwarzenegger, as well as war films. However, in 1986 *The Gods Must be Crazy* was an unexpected smash hit.

Although foreign films have always been important, an active Thai film industry has also more or less flourished. In the 1950s around twenty-five films were made each year; in the 1960s the average was around forty each year, and in the early eighties the average was around 120.⁶ In the boom period of the late 1980s the output was even higher, and the issue of film, culture and national identity emerged into public debate, along with issues raised by the

popularity of the VCR.⁷ The Thai film industry is very much a case of 'quick rich/quick poor'. There has never been government financial support for the film industry, and high tariffs have been placed on film stock, processing costs and so on. Taxes on film have fluctuated; in the early 1980s taxes were increased to ten times their previous levels, but in the later part of the decade the government began to tax imported foreign films more highly to make local productions more competitive. At this same time, Hong Kong and western films were in any case less popular, and a number of technically sophisticated and popular films appeared, especially those in the drama genre. Since 1987 there has been an awareness of the teenage market, and a large number of low-budget but technically competent films appeared about the lives of urban teenagers. These films are truly *nam nao* – a Thai expression meaning literally 'dirty water', metaphorically, 'rubbish' – but they have made a lot of money.

In the absence of government support, and because language and cultural difficulties mean there is no market outside Thailand for Thai films, films must be shot on what are, by western standards, extremely low budgets, using a lot of location shooting in familiar and culturally significant locales. Certain film companies specialize in certain kinds of films and develop a family of actors who appear in film after film, usually in similar roles. Many of the actors playing married couples, or people in love, are in fact married or involved with each other in real life.

Film stars, like television news readers and night-club singers, have a very high popular profile in Thailand and appear in many different guises and roles. Film stars may be called upon to grace the tables of senior military and business figures' parties, singers to appear at charities and galas, news readers to judge prize and game shows, and in general to circulate in certain high profile public environments. A thriving magazine industry reports on their every move, giving complete details of the stars' private lives, marital difficulties, life crises and so on. This means that events on screen, particularly quarrels and fights between couples, are watched with special interest in the light of what the fanzines are saying about their lives. The line between fiction and reality is hazy, and the overlap between on- and off-screen lives is even stronger than it is in Hollywood. There is a sense in which this collective fantasy space, opened up by the interpenetration of movie-world and real-world, is itself characteristic of subjectivity in modernity. The 'public' nature of the lives of these projected 'others', so alien to and distant from most ordinary people, seems to allow a new kind of collective consciousness which is a hallucination of desire in which all can equally participate. From this point of view, it is centrally important that they be, both in reality and in their film roles, glamorous, wealthy, and surrounded by the symbolic capital marking success in

modern Thailand: the BMW or Mercedes, the portable telephone, the designer clothes and experiences of foreign travel. However, it is equally important that all of this be seen as problematic: sickness, heartache, suffering and disillusion must also exist for these imaginary figures just as it does for everybody else. Wealth and glamour, then, although the product of new economic opportunities and by inference available to anyone, cannot itself turn aside the laws of fate, which of course in Buddhist Thailand is a much more powerful concept than is the case in the modern West.

Thai genre conventions classify films in a number of distinct categories. Video stores and film magazines tend to classify films as: drama (*nang chiwit*), comedy (*nang talok*), action (*nang bu*), historical (*nang prawatisat*) and musicals (*nang pleeng*). A further means of classification is often applied to subtypes of the 'drama' by theme: for example 'struggle between good and evil', 'conflict about unequal social status', 'conflict over marital relations'. Often, popular films will turn into longer television series, and vice versa, sometimes featuring the same actors. In Thai popular tradition, as is the case in most of Asia, repetition of a familiar theme is part of narrative pleasure, and in films the pleasure is doubled if the same cast appears in the same kind of story. Furthermore, while these stories are set in modern times, elements of them can be interpreted through much older narrative forms: Thai classical literature, traditional tales based on the *Ramayana*, tales of the lives of the Buddha, and *likay* popular folk drama, provide echoes in the modern drama, and the intertextual framework of audience interpretation. What *differentiates* the modern drama, however, is the complexity of the issues underlying the moral stance and final outcome of the plot. In traditional narratives, the conflicting elements are well known and their outcomes are entirely predictable: in the modern drama, the circumstances of modernity themselves impose unexpected and unlikely possibilities, and different possible outcomes.

I have shown *nang chiwit* to a number of western audiences, and many comment that they seem very much like *Dallas* or *Dynasty* in their concentration on the life crises of the bourgeoisie. However, this is a very superficial interpretation, although one often shared with Thai intellectuals who seek a social realist film industry with a focus on injustice to the poor. The 'drama' films usually incorporate comic episodes, with stock characters usually representing domestic servants or neighbours of a lower class or rural origin. This is reminiscent of some American films of the 1930s, where black servants provided comic relief. There are no fantasy, surrealist or utopian elements in these films, neither do they include ghosts or the supernatural. They invariably involve male-female relations, but within a context of family configurations from which their dynamic emerges. They are not exactly *about* women, although usually told

through a woman's position. Marital problems are invariably important, but these take place against a network of cause and effect which derives from Thai notions of merit, *karmic* consequence, and family responsibility.

'Feminine suffering' is a predominant theme in much Asian film. However, in Thai films, while the suffering is certainly present, the main female character will usually, through her own determination, overcome the circumstances confronting her. The 'suffering woman' theme is often parodied: while female characters often suffer from heart disease, many films present this as a possible ploy by a manipulative woman, or treat it as part of the comic element of the film. Reproductive difficulties, however, loom large and are taken seriously. Relations between women and their female relatives are prominent: women's closest relations are with their aunts, while, if they are shown to have mothers at all, they are often hostile or at least difficult. Mothers, generally, are shown as scheming and unfair to their daughters, wishing them only to make advantageous marriages with economic and social benefits, no matter what the daughter wants. Men, however, have warm and trusting relations with their mothers, who seek to protect them from scheming and manipulative women. Fathers are remarkably absent; they may have died in tragic circumstances, or committed suicide, before the beginning of the film, or may have left the family for a minor wife (*mia noi*) to whom they have given all their money. Other than fathers, men fall into two general classes: the 'hero', who is usually a gambler, drinker and womanizer, but can be reformed, and the 'gentleman', who is everything the hero ought to be and is not: well-bred, refined, intelligent and kind. He may love the heroine, but he never wins her.

Among a number of recurrent themes is the relation between the city and the countryside. In Thailand, urbanization has proceeded apace, but only the capital, Bangkok, is a really large city. Most Bangkokians have relatives in the countryside, and wealthy people always have one or more country houses to which they retreat on weekends and holidays. The countryside and its people remains an important signifier of a way of life which continues as a reality in Thailand, unlike the situation in the West where the nostalgia for country life is completely imaginary since rural production systems have hardly existed for several generations now. The sophisticated urban dweller in Thailand need only travel a hundred or so miles outside the capital to see farmers working ricefields with buffalo. Of course, glimpsed through the doorways are televisions and VCRs.

It is easy to see the capital city itself as a major character in many films. The city's meaning derives from its counterpoint with the tranquillity and genuineness to be found in the countryside. Scenes in the city depict dense traffic, the airport, high-rise office buildings, shopping malls, international hotels, and intensive care units in large

modern hospitals. Often these scenes include *farang* (foreigners) eating, drinking, walking or making videos. A friend of mine, a long-time resident of Thailand, is often asked to turn up on a film set and act as a 'passing foreigner'. But the foreigners do not take a role in the film: they are the background signifiers of international modernity, like the airport. Dilemmas, confusions and conflicts emerge, as characters move between the city environs, their homes in the wealthy suburbs, and the countryside. The homes are inevitably lavish and enormous, in the popular 'estate' styles with Grecian columns and marble statues. Interiors are elaborate, and telephones feature both as icons of communication on which the camera lingers, and as the means through which the complex network of the plot unrolls. In a number of films the same house provides the set, and is recognized as such by the viewers.

Leaving the luxurious mansion, and the city itself, provides a means of helping the characters to come to terms with, or better understand, their problems. Famous holiday towns, such as Pattaya, Chiang Mai and Phuket, provide favoured locations. Usually the central characters go to such places together where, away from the prying eyes and interference of their families, they struggle to understand the dilemmas facing them. But only in truly rural surroundings is genuine understanding possible. Here, the questions of identity and past lives which often underly the narrative can be explained. Such places include the homes of relatives still leading a rural life, or scenic places of great significance to Thai culture, such as mountains and waterfalls.

Also important in many films is the experience of living outside Thailand and the problems which stem from returning to deal with cultural expectations and moral positions which the expatriate experience has brought into question. Many films begin with a character coming back from studying abroad. This is a very old theme in Thai narrative; a pioneering work in this vein was published in 1906, called *Ruang Khang Khang*, 'Unfinished Story'. The author was Prince Bidyalankarana, under the pen name, No Mo So. Another member of the Royal Family, Prince Vajiravudh, later to become King Rama VI, wrote *Huachai Chai Noom*, 'The Heart of a Young Man', which tells of a young Thai educated abroad, written as a series of letters to his friend who is still in England. The writer complains about the absurd social arrangements he finds in Thailand, particularly traditional marriage arrangements and the exploitation of women. Defying family and tradition, he marries a westernized educated young woman, only to find that, like westerners generally, she is unfaithful to him, and the marriage is destroyed.⁸ The problems raised by traditional Thai values and beliefs, in the light of the destabilizing effect of a western education, provides another means through which the dilemmas of modernity are translated to a broader Thai audience.

⁸ Wibha Senanan, *The Genesis of the Novel in Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich, 1975), pp. 74–7.

Another major theme almost inevitably touched upon is the problem of male–female romance and marriage in the context of common Thai expectations of male sexual behaviour. Successful Thai men are expected to take a ‘minor wife’ (or more than one), and to have contacts with prostitutes as a normal aspect of sexual life. For first wives, the problem is how to deal with the threats to their own and their children’s financial welfare as a result of their husband taking a minor wife. For minor wives, the problem is often the dividing line between their precarious social position and that of the prostitute. In many films, the dividing line between heroine and prostitute is negotiable: there is an ever-present threat that, if a woman fails to secure her own financial and social position, a life of prostitution will almost certainly follow. In some films, the pressures of a grasping family and refusal to accept a daughter’s love-choice leads her into prostitution; in others, the heroine is believed wrongly to be a prostitute and may be raped or socially degraded, often leading to her madness or suicide.

The dynamic through which the plots operate emerges from the family situation of the major characters, and a major crisis (or series of them) through which the emotions, passions and confusions of the characters will be worked out. The predominant theme concerns the young person wrongly displaced from their proper social and financial heritage. This central character, (sometimes more than one, for example a brother and a sister) are forced into actions through no original fault of their own, but as a result of parental or familial misdeeds, of bad *karma* or events in past lives which are only now working themselves out. The themes of predestination are very important: people fall in love with inappropriate partners because they were lovers in a past life, or because one failed to meet another’s expectations in a past life and now has returned to obtain vengeance. However, no matter how difficult or painful the circumstances may be, it is expected that there will be some kind of forgiveness and resolution among the characters at the end, even if great sacrifices are called for. The person who has been wrongly excluded from their family’s heritage will be reincorporated, usually through marriage.

It is difficult to obtain a chronological series of films of this genre in Thailand. In video stores, for instance, very few ‘old’ films are retained – ‘old’ being anything made more than five or so years previously. Shop owners, keen to minimize costs, wipe a film as soon as its popularity has waned and replace it with another. Hence video stores do not contain anything like a representative sample over time. Nevertheless, it is clear from conversation that the conventions of what can be shown and discussed have been substantially liberalized over the past few decades, notwithstanding the strict censorship still enforced. My assistant in Hua Hin said that only in her last year at high school (around 1975) did she see people

kissing in a Thai film for the first time. Because sexual matters were so much more central to western films, her mother went to see any such film in advance, before permitting the daughter to attend it. Thai films are still unable to depict any overt sexual material (nakedness, for instance, is not permitted at all), but the kinds of situations described, and in some cases virtually depicted on screen (as in the self-induced abortion, to be discussed below) take people into situations the like of which are seldom encountered in western films.

Another central aspect of *nang chiwit* is the extraordinary verbal expressions of emotion which occur within them. Scenes show characters in great passion, barely under control, using wild metaphorical language, insults, and elaborate constructions to express their rage, disdain, hostility and fear. This is particularly striking where such language is used between women, particularly older and younger women linked by kinship; normally younger women should show polite and modest speech and demeanour to all older people, most particularly relatives. These violent verbal quarrels seldom result in serious physical struggle, however, perhaps substituting for them. They are both deeply shocking and profoundly amusing to the Thai audience.

In the brief space available here it is impossible to give more than a brief discussion of one film, as an exemplar of the genre I have discussed. This film was immensely popular when screened in 1987. It deals with the problem of the consequences of parental wrongs on the individual lives of the younger generation, and raises the fine line between social and moral respectability, and prostitution, for women. In *Mai Sin Ray Fai Sawat* ('No End to Passion's Fire'), produced in 1986, the heroine is forced into taking the position of minor wife, which she interprets as that of a prostitute, to redeem her family's property from a young man whose own father was forced to suicide by a gambling debt to her father.

Produced by Pornphol Ratchawina Film, a production company specializing in *nang chiwit*, this was no. 22 of its series, and starred Natthaya Daengbungar, who received a prize for best actress as a result. The following is a very schematized account of the twists and turns of plot.

A young woman, Chichaba, returns to Bangkok from study overseas on account of her father's suicide. She learns that this was the result of a card game at which he lost the family's house and land. The man who won the game, Pattawi, proposes that if she will be his mistress for two years he will wipe out the debt and return the family property. She does not understand why he wants to take this form of revenge on her family, but feels she has no option but to agree. He is engaged

to a young girl, Som, who has a grasping mother. Chichaba is a virgin and is terrified of becoming pregnant, which she fears will happen if she fulfills the agreement. She consults a doctor about contraception, and thinking about what he has told her on the way home she collides with the car of Mom Chai Io, a Prince of the Royal Family. He falls in love with her at once, knowing nothing of her agreement with Pattawi. She cannot tell him, but sees him occasionally. Meanwhile she avoids having sex with Pattawi, who becomes more and more enraged and vengeful. Chichaba begins to drink brandy and chain-smoke, and when Pattawi forces her to go out with him she dresses as a Patpong prostitute.

It is discovered that Pattawi's fiancée, Som, has a heart condition. He decides to marry her at once, after being told by the doctor that she could die if subject to strain. At the wedding Chichaba embarrasses everyone by publicly offering her compliments to the couple as the 'personal prostitute of Mr Pattawi'. The Prince has courted her up until this episode, and on one occasion all four of them go to Chiang Mai, where the Prince and Chichaba have a meaningful encounter by a waterfall which Pattawi spies through binoculars. However the Prince's mother has stepped in and demanded that Chichaba stop seeing him. After the wedding episode, the Prince is disillusioned with her, and furthermore concludes that she must be in love with Pattawi herself. Thereafter he gives up his pursuit of her.

Chichaba goes to visit her aunt in the countryside on several occasions, and finally there she learns the truth. Her father had much earlier won Pattawi's father's house, land and rice mill in a card game. As a result, Pattawi's father had hung himself under the house. The teenaged Pattawi had found his father's dangling body; shortly afterwards his mother was so distracted by grief that she too died. It was because of this that he vowed vengeance on the family, and deliberately engineered the card-game where her father lost everything.

Pattawi, Som (the new bride) and Chichaba all take up residence in the house (which of course was her family's home before the death of her father). On one occasion Chichaba runs away to her aunt's house, where Pattawi pursues her. He speaks to her kindly, and it is implied that they sleep together that night. When they return, they embrace downstairs, but Som, standing on the landing in a white nightdress, sees this, has a heart attack and falls down the stairs. She goes to the intensive care unit of the hospital, and lingers in a serious condition. At the same time, Chichaba, now realizing she is pregnant as a result of bouts of nausea, pretends to Pattawi that the baby is the Prince's conceived on their visit to the waterfall. The telephone rings to say that Som is in her death throes. Pattawi leaves the house in a rage and rushes to the hospital, but it is too late, Som has died. Chichaba, meanwhile left at home in despair, begins to drink heavily

and, in a ghastly scene, finds a coat-hanger and aborts herself on the bedroom floor. Pattawi comes home and finds her there, unconscious and bleeding. In the closing scenes she is convalescing in a hospital. She has been told that she has damaged herself so severely that now she will never be able to have children. Pattawi comes to her there, and finally begs her forgiveness on bended knee. She forgives him, holding his head against her breast, and they are united at last, the property now theirs in common.

This film contains most of the classic elements of the Thai drama, and was produced with great style and attention to detail. The Thai audience loved it, but the reviewer for the *Bangkok Post*, 'Poon Choke', saw it as just another version of the same old story. The central role, that of Chichaba, he dismissed with the observation that it 'has had so many precedents that any emotional response to it does not have any lasting significance'. Its typicality also lay in the ending: 'despite the terrible situation both protagonists find themselves in, they will eventually reconcile their differences to permit a suitably happy conclusion'.⁹ The annihilation of the conflict over the gambling debts, and the fact that they now both can share in the family estate, is the 'happy ending'; although to a western viewer the fact that the heroine cannot have children, the gambler's blood of Chichaba inherited from her father, and the vengefulness and polygamous tendencies of Pattawi do not suggest a peaceful marital future.

However, there is another way in which the happy ending can be read. It is significant firstly in the light of the struggles in Thailand today over the maintenance of family property holdings, not only among the wealthy bourgeoisie (who may lose property through bad business dealings, gambling and so on), but also among many rural people and smallholders, tempted to sell their family property through indebtedness, or through the blandishments of developers seeking ever increasing amounts of land for golfcourses, beach resorts and large-scale plantations. The *nang chiwit*, with its emphasis on the importance of keeping family assets together no matter what the cost, has a special significance to many outside the urban bourgeoisie today. The role of daughters in redeeming family heritage is also important: while women in Thailand are prominent landholders in their own right, today there is also a strong tendency for upwardly mobile families to invest in their daughters' education as a means of family security.¹⁰ Films such as this indicate that putting one's faith in daughters is a sensible strategy, especially given the 'fecklessness' of the Thai male. Yet the ending also means, for young women, that some individual choice will be left to her: her childlessness can itself be seen as a benefit, since it will free her from the controls and limitations which maternity puts upon women.

⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 8 January 1987, p. 12.

¹⁰ Jennifer Gray, 'The road to the city', PhD Thesis (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1989).

From yet another point of view, the resolution suggested by the last scenes, where Pattawi kneels at her feet begging for forgiveness and is taken to be held at her breast as a mother might hold a son, is also resonant with a possible happiness. The fact that she will be childless ensures that this man who has, up to now, tortured her can now transform his position towards her into that of loving son, the only secure and permanently attached relationship between men and women in the Thai imaginary. Hence it is a happy ending for both of them as individuals, not merely as family members. And we should note too that not only will they be childless, they are both now orphans and have no siblings. In this sense they have retained the best of the familial ideology, namely its accumulated property, while being freed as individuals from family ties altogether.

An aspect of this film which western viewers find deeply puzzling, however, is the notion that a man would take revenge on another man by forcing the daughter to become his mistress at a fixed price of, as the film tells us over and again, ten million baht (the value of Chichaba's family assets), while at the same time proceeding with a marriage to another girl whom he says he loves. The reviewer above regarded the plot as 'stereotypical', but it would be truly extraordinary in a western context, since 'revenge' has already been taken by the winning of the property. In a western melodramatic plot, it would be much more likely that the impoverished daughter would find a means of revenging herself on the man, for example by marrying him and then obtaining his assets by divorce.

But this touches on the question of the negotiable value of feminine sexuality, and the fine line between respectability and prostitution mentioned above. Prior to the 1970s young Thai girls were not permitted even to walk with a boy in public. Even today any form of physical contact, such as holding hands in public, is frowned upon. Respectable girls simply cannot have relations with foreign men, or they will be taken at once to be prostitutes.

If a girl lost her virginity or left family control, it was assumed that she would automatically go into prostitution. This of course may still be true today for girls with minimal education and a rural background. However, today, girls with education can certainly support themselves readily enough, although the familistic ideology is still very strong and young women normally live at home with their families until marriage.

However, the question is not merely a rational one as to how a girl might be able to make a living but concerns a more deeply-rooted equation of feminine sexuality with financial value. The text of this film makes these statements repeatedly. Near the beginning of the film there is an exchange between Chichaba and Pattawi while she is drunk on the bed. He says 'You're drunk'. She says 'What do you want, a queen or a mistress?'. He says 'I'm a trader; I want goods of high quality'. He talks of seeing her in this house when she

was sixteen, and about her father being a gambler, like himself. He says 'Now you are drunk enough to offer your goods. What do you think we are doing? This is business, I've bought the goods at a high price, now, if it's about the price, or if your goods have quantity but not quality. . . .' She throws her glass at him and they fight.

Later in the same room he tells her he realizes that in spite of her having been in the West a long time that she is a virgin, and that he has therefore 'won the jackpot'. She tells him 'You got the goods as a Satan would' and he replies 'Nevertheless, during the two years we are together, I will use my goods to cover the price I paid, every day, every day'.

In a scene between Chichaba and Som, the fiancée/wife, Som tells Chichaba that Pattawi is like a child with a new toy, but he will get bored with it after only a couple of uses; he sometimes plays for a long time but it depends on how much it costs. Chichaba says 'It depends on when he plays with it, how much he likes it'. Som says 'I warn you, when he uses you to cover the price it doesn't mean you can hope for anything from him'. Chichaba replies that she thinks of herself as a merchant, and him as the customer. Som says, 'So, well, you're just selling yourself'. Chichaba replies, 'Yes, but not many have such a high price, ten million baht. It doesn't matter if I'm selling it when the price is so high, some girls with a lot of money sell themselves just for a ring and honour as a fiancée, you know what I mean'.

These and many similar dialogues constitute the 'bad manners' which are so prominent in the genre. However the deeper equations being put forward between feminine sexuality and cash transactions say a great deal about the cultural view of feminine sexuality. The impact of the western pursuit of sex in Thailand has no doubt made this issue all the more compelling. The recognition of Thailand by westerners as primarily a sexual playground has made female sexuality a commercial item on the international financial market. But the prostitution reflected in the Thai film is depicted primarily as a problem internal to Thai society, and the lines between wife, minor wife and prostitute are hazily drawn. The commercialization of sexuality is hardly something new in Thai society, but the extent of it today seems to many Thai people to reflect just another of the impacts of western customs and values in a context where money and sex have always been, one way or another, linked.

There are many other recent films of the *nang chiwit* genre which show variations on these themes. Of increasing importance has been the semi-realist drama, which incorporates the stylistics of the genre but purports to tell something much closer to a 'true story', often based on an autobiographical story by a well-known writer. An analysis of these is beyond the scope of the present paper, but their existence suggests strongly a *rapprochement* between the traditional forms and the demands of an audience increasingly able to use film

to go beyond the classic themes of dispossession from familial heritage and a resultant moral crisis. The problems of a rising bourgeoisie, and indeed a relic aristocracy, trying to come to terms with the social consequences of the spirit of (late) capitalism are joined by the dilemmas of provincial and lower-status farmers and functionaries now equally being drawn into late global modernity. The problems of family perpetuity against individual desire, of money and sexuality, of countryside and city, are at the centre of these films, and the tacit conventions of their narratives reveal much about family drama as the domestic microcosm of much larger social and economic processes. The Thai film has for decades provided the main means of representation of these issues, and, through its extensive distribution all over the countryside as well as in the towns and capital city is one of the most powerful means for the emergence of a new collective consciousness about how *chiwit* – ‘life’ – can be understood in Thailand today.

Soap opera bridal fantasies

LAUREN RABINOVITZ

When *One Life to Live*'s resident siren-vixen, Tina Lord Roberts, walked down the aisle in the spring of 1988, the wedding vows she recited were a soap opera heroine's succinct declaration of ambivalence about impending marriage. Speaking to her groom-on-the-rebound Max Holden, she said, 'I take thee, *Cord*, uhh, I mean *Max*'. The symbolic value of naming at this especially privileged moment makes her statement rife with ambivalence – is she simply unsure about which man she wishes to marry? Or does her misnaming reflect an underlying uncertainty over monogamy and the end of romantic courtship with two men? Or is she resisting marriage as the end of her independence and right to her own sexuality? Even though the statement, emphasized in a closeup, is itself enough to establish productive meanings, it did not have to carry the full weight of the scene. In a subjective fantasy sequence that provided a classic case of 'overdetermination', Tina began the ceremony imagining that she was marrying her 'ex', Cord Roberts. Her 'mistake' replaced a smiling Cord with Max as the groom. Max, responding to what Tina kept insisting was a simple slip of the tongue, stopped the wedding.

Meanwhile, soap superstar Erica Kane of *All My Children* (ABC, 1970–) delayed her walk down the aisle in order to discuss with a friend whether or not she really wanted to go through with the marriage. After keeping the groom, the guests, and the audience waiting for as long as possible (two days in real time, several hours in 'soap time'), she returned to the wedding scene. But the disruption made for a less than perfect storybook ceremony. Although weddings interrupted by a change of heart are a regular feature of many daytime soap operas, these particular examples are



All My Children

richly suggestive of the important position that marriage holds in daytime serial narrative as well as the potential multiplicity of its meanings. Television scholars agree that in soap operas, 'Marriage is not a point of narrative and ideological closure because soap operas interrogate it as they celebrate it. Building the threat into the celebration opens marriage up to readings other than those preferred by patriarchy.'¹

Such moments are integral to larger considerations of soap operas as narratives of distinct feminine address. Soap operas' distinctive narrative patterns have been identified as feminized modalities – their open-endedness and continuity, their multiple and cyclical storylines, their reliance on repetition, excess, disruption, and deferment. Soap operas have also been discussed in terms of how they construct sexual difference differently – in other words, by fetishizing *relationships* rather than the *body*; by generating pleasure through continuous deferments; by foregrounding traditionally feminine skills of verbalizing emotions and interpersonal relationships as legitimate, powerful tools for social control; and through a characteristic programming 'flow' which mirrors the rhythms and routines of domestic activities and the sexual division of household labour.

Such genre definitions originated in the early 1980s as feminist critics began to identify textual features that allowed soap operas a 'feminine space' for producing pleasurable responses while maintaining women's pleasure in the service of patriarchy. Two important models were Tania Modleski's argument that daytime dramas are a feminine address organized around the rhythms of the white middle-class homemaker's work and Charlotte Brunsdon's analysis of how a soap opera constructs a feminine address that draws on a range of gendered cultural discourses.² Modleski and Brunsdon also made two important assumptions that furthered more general discussions about female television spectatorship as something distinctly different from female movie spectatorship: actual viewers should not be discussed in the abstract as an idealized spectator, nor should the relationship between the viewer and the television screen be modelled after the cinematic ideal of an intense and concentrated relationship in a darkened room.

While their analyses have played important roles in a history of feminist television criticism, it is also important to point out their differences from each other. Modleski's concerns are primarily organized by what material markers signify the text, an arena largely defined by literary and critical theory.³ Brunsdon locates textual meanings through their organization and regulation in wider cultural discourses. She activates a move from an appreciation of soap opera primarily as the textual space that addresses distinct feminine pleasures to soaps' social functions as an institutional site that engages struggle over cultural meanings. Lidia Curti's recent

1 John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 181.

2 Tania Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Crossroads: notes on a soap opera', *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1981), pp. 32–7. The discussions as well as the modifications of their arguments are already well documented. See, for example, Annette Kuhn, 'Women's genres', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1984), p. 25; Ann Gray, 'Behind closed doors: video recorders in the home', in Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds), *Boxed In: Women and Television* (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 38–54.

3 Modleski, *Loving With A Vengeance*.

discussion of the fascination which soap operas hold as the confluence of the image, the female spectator, and desire infers support for the direction of this move:

Those who fall into the temptation of thinking of women's television, of the screen space materially occupied by women, as a space *for* women, have been accused of falling into 'the seductive trap of the image', of taking its sheer presence as a triumph or at least as a mark of presence of a subjective position, of the independence of desire.⁴

The assumption here, as proposed in reading formation studies, is that meaning is not textually inherent but a result of a reader's relationship with a text and the cultural and temporal 'sediments' attached to or 'encrusted' onto any popular text.⁵ In the words of Angela McRobbie, a text becomes meaningful to readers only 'within the discourses through which it is mediated to its audience and within which its meanings are articulated'.⁶ While various culture critics from Janice Radway to David Morley have attempted to analyse this dimension of experience through ethnographic audience research, I prefer to examine the cultural discourses organized through economically overlapping and converging institutions in the television, print media, and fashion industries.⁷ Such an examination is not a mere 'preference' since the ways that industrial and media discourses activate a range of meanings while closing down others is integral to how we theorize or develop concepts of contemporary cultural production and practices. By analyzing daytime television's representation of the wedding ritual as a formation in wider cultural practice, I can suggest how in the late 1980s and early 1990s female desire and pleasure have been culturally produced through consumption and use for at least some groups of spectators.

A contemporary set of relations among spectators, the apparatus of video-recorder technology, and the discursive intertext among television soaps, fan magazines and production companies currently defines the parameters of the television industry's discourse on soap operas as a media genre. The A.C. Nielsen Company, which produces commodified information about audiences for the US television industry, reports that at least fifty-eight per cent of television homes in the United States have video recorders.⁸ The figure signifies a change not only in *how* we watch soaps but *who* watches daytime serial dramas. Television's demographers likewise assert that soap operas are no longer the exclusive domain of the adult, white female housewife, who characterized the target audience in the 1950s through to the 1970s; today's soap operas may draw on the average thirty per cent male viewers, forty-four per cent female viewers who work part- or full-time outside the home, and

- 4 Lidia Curti, 'What is real and what is not: female fabulations in cultural analysis' in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 146.
- 5 For example, see Tony Bennett, 'Texts/readers/reading formations', *Literature and History*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1983), pp. 214–27; Tony Bennett and Janet Woolcott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Methuen, 1987). For examples specifically about soap operas, see Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Jane Feuer, 'Reading *Dynasty*: television and reception theory', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 2 (1989), pp. 443–60.
- 6 Angela McRobbie, 'Settling accounts with subculture: a feminist critique' in T. Bennett, G. Martin, C. Mercer and J. Woolcott (eds), *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader* (London: Batsford Academic and Education Ltd, 1981), pp. 113–23.
- 7 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).
- 8 A. C. Nielsen, 'TV homes', January 1988, quoted in *TV Basics 1988–89: The Television Bureau of Advertising's Report on the Scope and Dimensions of Television Today* (New York: Television Bureau of Advertising, 1988), p. 2.

9 Judith Waldrop and Diane Crispell, 'Daytime dramas, demographic dreams', *American Demographics*, vol. 10, no. 10 (1988), p. 30.

10 See, for example Ben Brown, 'Booming TV-taping puts soaps first', *USA Today*, 4 May 1984, p. A-1; David Crook, 'Soaps make a big splash with home video tapers', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1984, part VI, p. 1; 'The most-recorded list', *Channels*, February 1988, p. 112, is exemplary of the repetitive listing of soap operas as the most recorded programmes in North America.

11 Alan Leigh, 'Hotline: Hollywood', *Soap Opera Digest*, vol. 13, no. 9 (1988), p. 80.

12 The figure regarding ABC's 'Soap Talk' is from Waldrop and Crispell, 'Daytime dramas', p. 31.

13 Jerome Shapiro, quoted in Waldrop and Crispell, 'Daytime dramas', p. 29.

approximately twenty per cent non-white viewers.⁹ *All My Children's* producers estimate that their show is taped and watched daily by more than half of its total audience, a factor that they believe critically contributes to their especially high rating demographics among women who work outside the home, African-Americans, and adult males. Indeed, trade and general circulation periodicals alike regularly report that soap operas top all other categories of broadcast material for VCR home taping.¹⁰

The industry, however, expresses greater concern for the downward changes that have simultaneously occurred in the overall numbers of viewers currently being measured. The proliferation of cable stations and video recorders has generated a greater number of entertainment outlets for any given time period, and the ratings companies link a more dispersed audience to a decrease in the number of *network* viewers during all times of the day. In addition, ratings companies and the television industry posit that there are more daytime viewers who watch television outside the home and are hence not accounted for by current methods of measuring viewership. The result, according to *Soap Opera Digest*, is that 'daytime dramas are no longer the powerhouses of revenue they once were'.¹¹ Soap operas, in other words, are no longer the major source of advertising income for networks that could formerly generate predictable and sizable demographics of women from eighteen to forty-nine.

In the face of these reported economic circumstances, the television industry tries to lure increasing numbers of target women back to soap operas while not giving up the numbers and diversity of the audience that they generate. Their tactics include: advertising soap operas in newspapers, magazines and television; using marketing tie-ins (such as call-in hotlines like ABC's 'Soap Talk' which reported more than half a million callers in its first week); producing press materials for newspapers (particularly weekly plot summaries); and co-operating with fan or supermarket magazines steeped in star discourse.¹² In this latter category, soap opera magazines now dominate the fan-magazine market, and industry leader *Soap Opera Digest* has a circulation of four million readers. One report says that the combined market for soap operas and soap opera publications exceeds 40 million.¹³ In addition, the shows' narratives themselves respond to outside factors with story cycles that climax in 'sweeps weeks' or are organized around the four annual periods when ratings are measured to set advertising rates.

During the four sweep periods, plots speed up, become less multiple and interrupted, and offer dramatic courses of action and resolution. For example, they may intermix genres. In May 1988, *One Life to Live* (ABC, 1968-) mixed the soap opera narrative with the western and science fiction in its self-styled *Back to the Future/Shane* time travel plot set. In May 1987, it evoked the

fantastic with its out-of-the-body travel to the after-life plot. In February 1988, *All My Children* mimicked the made-for-television-movie in its two-hour 'movie-within-a-soap' entitled 'Erica: The Movie', wherein Erica Kane confronts the men and highlights of all ten of her past romantic liaisons in a continuous narration set within a dream (reminiscent of *All That Jazz*). In these instances, the producers draw upon associations with other popular culture texts and genres, their own star discourse of past and present cast members, and their desire to exceptionalize sweeps week episodes with highly romanticized costumes, exotic settings and location footage that contrasts the everyday look of the soap opera.

Since soaps during sweeps aim to deliver greater numbers of female viewers to advertisers, the industry predictably employs the biggest commodity spectacle of women's gendered roles – the wedding. In the 1987–8 season alone, *Soap Opera Digest* counted twenty-nine weddings that occurred in and around sweeps weeks (and that does not include weddings, like Tina's, that were never finished).¹⁴ My own count for a single sweeps week in February 1989 was ten weddings although not all the weddings were completed. The rhetoric of the fan magazines supports the privileged status of these events: 'Weddings may be a big deal in real life, but they're an even bigger deal on the soaps'.¹⁵ Put even more simply by another magazine writer: 'Weddings represent the apex of human experience on soap operas. You can go no higher on the scale'.¹⁶ Even when television scholars choose memorable soap opera examples for close textual analysis, they have a propensity to remember a sweeps week wedding episode as Sandy Flitterman-Lewis did in her recapitulation of a 1986 *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963–) wedding.¹⁷

Spectacular weddings were a new distinctive feature of US television soap operas in the 1980s. From the 1950s through the early 1970s, television weddings were 'simple affairs'. They were studio based and occurred in a family's living room, the home of the justice of the peace, or the small chapel of the always essential hospital workplace. The emphasis of camera shots and editing remained on the couple and their relationship, whether it was two people who had overcome adversity to express their mutual love or whether the bride had coerced the groom to the altar through a faked pregnancy. The wedding ceremony, itself set in familiar surroundings that were not separate from other narrative lines, functioned as both closure and crisis in ongoing plot developments. Before the 1980s, there was little fanfare prefiguring the wedding and no advance publicity outside the serials to encourage viewer curiosity about the wedding and its meanings.

Although weddings became 'bigger' events throughout the 1970s, it was Luke's and Laura's wedding on *General Hospital* in sweeps week of November 1981 – the early years of the Reagan era and the

14 Meredith Brown, 'Editor's note', *Soap Opera Digest*, vol. 13, no. 20 (1988), p. 10.

15 Diva Von Dish, 'The best and worst wedding dresses', *Soap Opera Digest*, vol. 14, no. 22 (1989), p. 130.

16 Stella Bednarz and Robert Rorke, 'What you'll never see at a soap opera wedding', *Soap Opera Digest*, vol. 14, no. 12 (1989), p. 34.

17 Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'Psychoanalysis, film and television', in Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 196–204.

season succeeding Prince Charles's and Lady Di's media-saturated wedding – that shifted the representation and function of soap opera weddings. The advent of Portapak video equipment now made location shooting both swift and economical. With a large crew on location at a replica of a Norman French chateau, *General Hospital* producers went all out to stage an extravagant fantasy wedding, complete with movie star Elizabeth Taylor in attendance as a mysterious wedding guest. The episodes received an unprecedented avalanche of press and television publicity before they were broadcast, and local news stations even did reports on college students watching and responding to the wedding on 16 November, thereby providing additional advertising for the 17 November conclusion.¹⁸ Luke's and Laura's wedding episodes of *General Hospital* remain to date the industry's most frequently cited example of the single most watched hours of daytime serials: sixteen million people tuned in each day.¹⁹

General Hospital's widely proclaimed success convinced other producers that such lavishly staged spectacles routinely promoted before broadcast date could improve ratings in the sensitive weeks when they mattered most. *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965–) executive producer Al Rabin said, 'Fairy-tale perfect ceremonies and pricey receptions are the rage on daytime television. . . . Without the pomp and circumstance, viewers would be clicking off their dials.'²⁰ Daytime soaps now construct multiple plot developments and even occasionally halt or defer all other plots around a single or double episode in sweeps periods. They regularly spend between \$300,000 and \$750,000 for these 'special' episodes, figures that belie the traditional myth of minimal expenditures in daytime productions. As *Soap Opera Digest* describes the phenomenon, 'The producers like to pump up the fantasies of their viewers and turn this simple ritual into an extravaganza'.²¹

For example, *Santa Barbara* (NBC, 1984–) itemized \$20,000 for one wedding's flowers and \$13,400 for casting a hundred extras as wedding guests in another ceremony. Scheduled to coincide with Andy's and Fergie's real-life wedding in 1986, *Days of Our Lives* gave viewers an on-location English wedding. The half-million dollar budget for Bo's and Hope's ceremony included a custom-designed bridal gown for \$20,000 and \$7,000 worth of flowers. *Days of Our Lives'* most expensive wedding, however, was a more recent \$750,000 extravaganza set on-location in Greece.

If I am highlighting the production budgets here, it is not simply to marvel over the price tags but to dramatize that the shows themselves emphasize certain lavish costs for remote sequences in their own publicity, in general interest magazines like *TV Guide*, and in the fan magazines. The repetitive identification of production costs always specifies items that contribute to and enhance the illusion of spectacle. The feature stories rarely mention labour.

18 I had never in my life watched *General Hospital* but I knew about and watched Luke's and Laura's wedding due to extensive media coverage in Chicago.

19 For example, see Mary Alice Kellogg, 'Soaps: happy 25th. G.H.', *TV Guide*, vol. 36, no. 13 (1988), p. 18.

20 Mary Beth Sammons, 'How much do TV weddings cost?', *Soap Opera Digest Presents Best Soap Weddings*, vol. 1, no. 35 (1988), p. 44.

21 Von Dish, 'The best and worst wedding dresses', p. 130.



Santa Barbara



All My Children

transportation or equipment costs – production expenses that do not ‘show’ on the screen. In contrast, bridal gowns, costumes, flowers, regal limousines and carriages, food displays, and other sumptuous visual trappings and sets are described in detail. The publicity both exceptionalizes the sweeps episodes as costlier and more spectacular than ‘everyday’ soap operas while it also influences the marketplace by defining the event through the very commodities that prospective brides are elsewhere encouraged to purchase.

Fan magazines especially foreground this association between the spectacle on the screen and real-life weddings. Entire magazines like *Soap Opera Wedding Album* and *Soap Opera Digest Wedding Special*, and articles in *Soap Opera Digest* such as ‘The ten most breathtaking gowns’, ‘A shopper’s guide to soaps’ most elegant wedding dresses’, ‘How to dress like a soap opera bride’, ‘TV weddings: the inside stories’, ‘I must have that dress!’ and ‘Wild wedding’ are representative of regularized coverage on soap opera weddings as idealized commodity packages.²² The fan magazines even explicitly link the onscreen weddings to the real-life weddings of the actor-stars who participate in both by featuring colour photographs of each wedding side-by-side.²³ A *Soap Opera Digest* reporter summarizes her magazine’s ideological perspective: ‘Sure, the sex, scandal and backstabbing are great. But, let’s face it, what really interests many soap viewers is one of the most important aspects of life: clothing.’²⁴

Such fan magazines are aimed at exactly the same female demographic group that consumes such publications as *Bride’s Magazine*, *Southern Bride*, *Elegant Bride* and *Modern Bride*. Whereas bridal magazines are more like thick merchandizing catalogues that offer slim prose material but are chock-full of colour advertisements, soap opera fan magazines present themselves primarily as ‘easy’ reading or ‘browsing’ material with brief large-print articles, few advertisements, and colour reserved largely for star photographs. Although fan magazines generally do not employ the characteristic direct address prose that bridal magazines use to exhort and chasten the individual bride-to-be, their coverage of soap opera weddings often does use direct address as punctuation, and they feature colour fashion photography which mimics the high-gloss, full-page advertisements of wedding gowns in *Bride’s Magazine*. Colour wedding photos are either of the bride and groom – caught both formally and ‘candidly’ – or are full-length portraits of the bride outfitted, posed, and lighted to emphasize her glamour while she looks directly at the viewer.

Fan magazines have even gone so far as to acknowledge the intertextual relations among fan magazines, bridal magazines and soap operas, suggesting that each one stimulates the purchase of the other two: ‘First and foremost, forget the bridal consultant. Just flick on that dial and tune into the wonderful world of soap operas.

²² ‘The ten most breathtaking gowns’, *Soap Opera Digest Presents Best Soap Weddings*, vol. 1, no. 35 (1988), pp. 452–52; Terry Collymore, ‘A shopper’s guide to soaps’ most elegant wedding dresses’, vol. 17, no. 12 (1992), pp. 20–8; Mary Beth Sammons, ‘How to dress like a soap opera bride’, vol. 13, no. 25 (1988), pp. 20–4; ‘TV weddings: the inside stories’, vol. 15, no. 17 (1990), pp. 15–23; Mary Beth Sammons, ‘I must have that dress!’ vol. 13, no. 10 (1988), pp. 140–4; Mary Beth Sammons, ‘Wild wedding’, vol. 15, no. 17, (1990), pp. 24–8.

²³ A good example is ‘Stars’ real-life weddings’, *Soap Opera Digest*, vol. 12, no. 13 (1987), pp. 28–40. Even the weekly tabloid press participates in this practice of comparing soap-opera stars’ television weddings to their offscreen ones. ‘Which is the fairy tale wedding and which is for real?’ *The National Enquirer Special 100 Superstar Weddings*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1992), p. 3.

²⁴ Sammons, ‘I must have that dress!’, p. 140.

²⁵ Sammons, 'How to dress like a soap opera bride', p. 20.

²⁶ *Bride's Magazine* editor Barbara Tober, quoted in Irene Krause, Kathryn Walsh and Hildee Zwick, 'The making of a TV wedding', *Soap Opera Wedding Album: Daytime TV's Greatest Stories*, no. 21 (1988), p. 8.

²⁷ Sammons, 'I must have that dress!', p. 144.

²⁸ Krause et al, 'The making of a TV wedding', p. 7.

²⁹ Sammons, 'I must have that dress!', p. 144.

³⁰ Sammons, 'How to dress like a soap opera bride', p. 20.

³¹ Krause et al, 'The making of a TV wedding', pp. 7–8.

³² Sammons, 'I must have that dress!', p. 144.

³³ Sammons, 'How to dress like a soap opera bride', p. 24.

where wedding attire has always been a fashion show'.²⁵ One fan magazine article quotes the editor of a bridal magazine saying, 'I know that costume designers look in magazines for soap opera wedding gowns. The gowns are inspired by the magazines. The bride then goes back to the magazine to find something similar.'²⁶ The relationship is especially enunciated through individual dresses. Employing the characteristic second-person address of a bridal magazine, one fan magazine article stated, 'It may be just coincidence, but look in the recent issues of bridal magazines. Is that or is it not the Nina wedding look?' (referring to *All My Children's* daring, strapless, black velvet, and white satin wedding gown shown in December 1986).²⁷ Indeed, one magazine subsequently reported that the dress caused a 'rush' on black velvet gowns in 'department stores across America'.²⁸

Like the bridal magazines that address women with pictures of gowns and accessories for sale in today's lucrative consumer bridal market, the fan magazines offer plenty of advice on wedding dress purchases. One article interviews *Loving's* (ABC, 1983–) costume designer who tells the story of a visiting fan: 'She quizzed me about everything from where I bought Ava's bridal dress to what kind of shoes she was wearing, what Ava wore after the wedding, how they did her makeup. . . . [She] really wanted to be Ava on her wedding day.'²⁹ Another article cajoles, 'If *All My Children's* Nina can go strapless in black velvet, you certainly can, too'.³⁰

The idea that women want to model their weddings on those of the soaps figures throughout these stories. According to one fan magazine author, *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952–) received five hundred telephone calls about Reva's bridesmaids' dresses: 'Every young girl across America wanted that dress'.³¹ Another production company quoted in a fan magazine said, 'Most of the calls [we get] are from middle Americans like people from Kansas City'.³² Put another way by *All My Children's* costume coordinator: 'Soap opera characters get to be a princess every day of their lives. In real life, you're only allowed one day'.³³ All these articles base their art of persuasion not on the bridal market's explicit argument about doing what is fashionable this season but on stories about *other* women's desires to identify with soap opera stars. In effect, they reassure that desire for celebrity glamour can be fulfilled with the right purchases and that such desire is culturally sanctioned because there is already a community of viewers who rely upon television weddings as a video catalogue of prospective fantasy wedding packages.

But such stories always contain a contradictory note. The very same articles also promise that real-life women cannot attain their fantasy ideal through the simple purchase of the right clothes. *Days of Our Lives* costume designer Lee Smith tells how she always responds to requests about the show's gown patterns, and then she assures the reader, 'I think many of [the fans] want their real-life

34 Sammons, 'I must have that dress!', pp. 143–4.

35 Ibid., p. 144.

36 T. J. Jackson Lears, 'From salvation to self-realization: advertising and the therapeutic roots of consumer culture, 1880–1930' in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (eds), *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 1–38.

wedding to look exactly like what's on TV. But you've also got to take into account that the women we're dressing here are all extremely beautiful. It's a little more than just the clothes.'³⁴ Elsewhere, the owner of a Brooklyn bridal salon that outfits actresses from *All My Children* and *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956–) says:

As soon as the soap opera bride walks down the aisle, we're swamped with brides who want to look just like the stars. . . . The major problem we have is that these real-life girls have a fantasy of the dress and what they think they can look like if they have exactly what some star was wearing. Unfortunately, we've often just got to be honest and say, 'You are short and not so svelte as the star'.³⁵

The stories both evade and repress how the soap opera fantasy is constructed in and through lighting and camera angles, multiple takes and rehearsals, post-production and editing, a large behind-the-scenes labour crew and thousands of dollars. They instead displace the impossibility of achieving that fantasy onto the 'real-life' women, who are figured as inadequate when physically compared with the 'extraordinary' stars.

Of course, the contradiction feeds back into the relentless bulk of advertising that propels both the magazines and shows, promising greater personal beauty if one buys hair colour, make-up, diet pills, and other cosmetic self-improvement aids. While it has long been argued by advertising historians like Jackson Lears that advertising stimulates desire and promises pleasure while it also frustrates that pleasure in order to keep consumers buying continuous supplies of the product, it is important to articulate here how that cycle is maintained in soap operas through a larger, more complex set of relations than simply the fiction and its interlarded commercials.³⁶ These soap opera weddings, as managed and framed through their discursive relationships to larger industrial and cultural institutions, do not so much imply the importance of a shared cultural understanding of wedding rituals as the importance of mediation itself on behalf of viewers who are chastened and taught proper consumer responses amid the multivocalities otherwise frequently celebrated in the soap opera genre.

Soap opera weddings' intertextual claims on the fashion system and publishing industries seemingly implicate the worst fears of cultural critics who argue that the effects of commodity culture are totalizing. The soap opera wedding's conflicted and contradictory expression of a woman's desire for self is not only duplicated and proliferated in the intertextual discourse but also through the consumer behaviour on which the discourse is dependent. We do maintain the ability, however, to respond oppositionally to soap opera weddings, for example as subversive readers (and here I am

37 Feuer, 'Reading *Dynasty*: television and reception theory'; Mark Finch, 'Sex and address in *Dynasty*', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), pp. 24–43.

thinking of possible applications of Jane Feuer's and Mark Finch's recent work on gay readings of *Dynasty*) or as deconstructionists of commodities and commodity culture.³⁷ But these examples that argue against the totalizing effects of commodity culture are only partial or incomplete strategies for addressing social and economic inequalities in capitalism. What is at stake in the act of such subversion or analysis as a means of resistance – and not within a politics of reifying our own pleasure – is how pleasures in popular culture are hegemonically constructed. In our recent historical haste to rationalize our scholarly investment in the fictional soap opera text and in our *desire* to mediate the soap opera genre for feminist purposes, we too often neglect how pleasure itself is subjected to and regulated through the interests of commodity consumerism.

My thanks to Lynn Spigel for her contribution to my revision of this article.

- 1 Brian Henderson, 'Romantic comedy today: semi-tough or impossible?', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1978), pp. 11–23.
- 2 Mike Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', *The Guardian*, 6 June 1991, p. 30.
- 3 One might mention here, though, the fact that 'big-budget, action-adventure films' have hardly been 'replaced': *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves* and *Terminator II* are breaking box-office records as I write.
- 4 Recent publications on romantic comedy include Bruce Babington and William Peter Evans, *Affair to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller (eds), *The Screwball Comedy Films: A History and Filmography 1934–1952* (London: St James Press, 1991); James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987); David R. Shumway, 'Screwball comedies: constructing romance and mystifying marriage', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 30, no. 4 (1991), pp. 7–23; and Ted Sennett, *Lunatics and Lovers* (New York: Limelight, 1985).
- 5 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 132–73; and Frank Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals: the "nervous romance" and the comedy of the sexes', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 26 (1990), pp. 57–72.

The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today

STEVE NEALE

Writing in 1978, Brian Henderson declared 'Romantic comedy today' to be 'semi-tough or impossible'.¹ Mike Bygrave, writing recently in *The Guardian* newspaper, reports that 'following the phenomenal success of *Ghost*, *Pretty Woman* and *Green Card*: Hollywood 'has resumed its affair with romantic comedy', and that romantic comedies are set in the early nineties to replace the 'big-budget, action-adventure films' that dominated the eighties.² Both Henderson and Bygrave tend in fact to overstate their respective cases, for reasons I shall examine in a moment.³ Both, though, raise interesting questions about a genre which is currently receiving a good deal of theoretical and critical attention, and whose current phase as reported by Bygrave I wish to look at in some detail.⁴ Beginning with Henderson and Bygrave (and drawing, explicitly and otherwise, on a number of ideas about romantic comedy and its various cycles put forward by Frank Krutnik),⁵ I shall then focus on some of the formal and structural – as well as ideological – characteristics of romantic comedy before focusing finally on the current cycle and some of its films.

For Brian Henderson, the 'impossibility' of romantic comedy in the seventies was the consequence of two sets of factors, one of them hinging on matters of representation and censorship, the other on attitudes to 'the self' and to heterosexual romance. Romantic comedy is founded, for Henderson, on what he calls 'the sexual question', a question that must remain unstated if the genre is to survive. He refers to *Semi-Tough* (1972) to argue his point:

At one point in *Semi-Tough* the heroine says to the hero, 'How

6 Henderson, 'Romantic comedy today', p. 21.

come we never fucked?' It is arguable that romantic comedy depends upon the suppression of this question and that with its surfacing romantic comedy becomes impossible.⁶

He then goes on to elaborate:

one can see the entire spectrum of romantic comedy as so many variations on this unuttered question. In comedies of old love, the unspoken question is 'Why did we stop fucking?' In comedies of new love, it is 'Why don't we fuck now?'⁷

7 Ibid., p. 21.

However,

Although romantic comedy is about fucking and its absence, this can never be said or referred to directly. This is perhaps the fascination of romantic comedy. It implies a process of perpetual displacement, of euphemism and indirection at all levels, a latticework of dissembling and hiding laid over what is constantly present but denied, unspoken, unshown.⁸

8 Ibid., p. 22.

Romantic comedy is thus as much a consequence of language and representation – of the ways in which the question is posed – as it is of the question itself. But in the wake of changes in Hollywood's – and America's – modes and methods of censorship in the late 1960s, the question can, now, be literally stated. 'On this ground alone,' Henderson concludes, 'it may be that romantic comedy is not an art that can flourish in this period.'⁹

9 Ibid., p. 22.

There are other grounds, too, which Henderson mentions briefly earlier on in his article, grounds having to do with changes in conceptions of the relationship between romance and personal fulfilment, and the emergence of a 'new' – more narcissistic – 'self':

Romantic comedy posited men and women willing to meet on a common ground and to engage all their faculties and capacities in sexual dialectic. . . . What we begin to see now in films is a withdrawal of men and women from this ground (or of it from them). Or we see – in effect the same thing – false presences in the sexual dialectic or divided ones (one realizes at the end that one did not want to play the game at all) or commitments for trivial stakes only. It seems that when the new self pulls itself together, it is away from the ground of full sexual dialectic.¹⁰

10 Ibid., p. 19.

Once again, 'to argue this is to argue the death of romantic comedy'.¹¹

11 Ibid., p. 22.

Ironically, as Frank Krutnik has pointed out, Henderson was writing this precisely at the moment at which a new cycle of romantic comedies began to emerge. Adopting Woody Allen's byline for *Annie Hall* (1977), Krutnik has dubbed the films in this cycle – which include *The Goodbye Girl* (1977), *Starting Over* (1979), *Manhattan* (1979), *Modern Romance* (1981), *Happy Endings*

12 Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 171–2; and Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', pp. 62–70.

13 On all these cycles see Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 166–73. The 'genteel' romances of the teens and twenties have been hardly discussed at all, though the earliest approximation to the use of the term 'romantic comedy' with which I am familiar occurs in a trade review of a film called *The Girl and the Judge*, which I have not seen, but which seems precisely to be a 'genteel' romance. (The review is in *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 1, no. 33 (1907), p. 526. The film is described as 'a romantic story with a strong comedy element running through it'.)

14 See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 171–2 and Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', pp. 62–70.

15 Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', p. 30.

(1983) and *Broadcast News* (1987), in addition to *Annie Hall* itself – 'nervous romances'.¹² Even more ironically, many of these nervous romances contained instances of 'sexually explicit' representation and points at which 'the sexual question' (or sexual questions) were openly stated, while at the same time their ideological specificity lay precisely in an engagement with the issues of 'commitment' and 'the sexual dialectic' in the era of 'the new self'. Indeed it could be argued that the (ideological) dislocation of fucking from 'commitment', and the (ideological) dislocation of both these things from marriage, formed both the precondition and problematic of nervous romances. Be that as it may, these films (together with those in the current cycle) demonstrate that the question at stake in romantic comedy is not just sexual (or not just a matter of fucking), however stated. It is rather one of coupledness, compatibility and, precisely, romance; and hence of the (changing and often contradictory) social conditions, institutions, discourses and practices that define and underpin them. The problems with Henderson's argument, it seems to me, stem on the one hand from an identification of romantic comedy as such with one of its cycles – the 'screwball' films of the thirties and forties. (He thus ignores not just later cycles like the fifties and sixties sex comedies, but earlier cycles too, like the sex comedies of the late teens and twenties, and the 'genteel' romances that both preceded them and overlapped with them.¹³) On the other hand, they stem from an idealization of the specific and particular constellation of conditions, institutions, discourses and practices that enabled their production, and the specific and particular version of 'the sexual dialectic' that they produced.

Like Henderson, Mike Bygrave uses the screwball cycle and the social and cultural conditions of the thirties and forties as an exclusive point of reference. However, unlike Henderson, he also mentions (albeit in somewhat simplistic terms) a major factor effecting changes in those conditions and in the films made under them – the advent of post-sixties feminism (along with 'the new self', a primary determinant of the 'nervousness' of the nervous romance – and often a butt of its jokes, gags and narrative logic¹⁴):

If society has changed since the thirties, so have relations between the sexes. Nowadays, the idea of romantic partners revealing their true selves is no longer . . . well, so romantic. Many people worry that the 'true self' of a member of the opposite sex is more likely to be the problem than the solution. Women worry that men's 'true selves' are 'feminist' in some emasculating sense. Both sexes fear the other may be concealing as much hatred as love for its opposite.¹⁵

Bygrave goes on to quote director Ivan Reitman, who mentions two

other factors, the advent of Aids, and the lack of 'rules' in modern romantic relationships:

'I think the problem Hollywood has with romance is a reflection of the problems people are having in real life. What are the rules of a relationship today? There are no rules. And how do you get as far as a relationship anyway in the age of Aids? How do you even meet the other person? There's a whole industry of video dating and phone services and personal ads that has sprung up in our society because the old ways don't work any more, or don't work for many people.'¹⁶

In the light of these comments – and of the difficulties and uncertainties registered by the nervous romance – the emergence of a new cycle of romantic comedies, which I shall simply term 'new romances', can perhaps be interpreted as an assertion, within and against these factors and conditions, of the values (if not the 'rules') of 'traditional' heterosexual romance. These values are, as we shall see, often markedly – and knowingly – 'old-fashioned', and as such help mark a reaction to the nervous romance itself.¹⁷

In making his point about changes in 'relations between the sexes', and the effect these changes have had on romantic comedy, Bygrave uses the example of what he calls the 'meet cute':

Hollywood's traditional way of getting two strangers together so they could fall in love was the 'meet cute'. 'Meets cute' were numerous, inventive variations on an old idea – man accidentally bumps into female stranger on the street, knocks over her groceries, helps pick them up, and so on.

Ever since the rise of feminism in the sixties, such encounters have been reinterpreted. A boss asks out his secretary. A cop dates a woman he has given a parking ticket. A man spots a stranger and follows her home, or anywhere else for that matter. All are likely to be seen as examples of sexual harassment instead of romantic encounters. The antagonism is all too obvious in the current American slang for a romantic proposition: 'Hitting on [someone]'.¹⁸

The example Bygrave uses to illustrate the concept of the 'meet cute' – knocking over someone's groceries in the street – is in fact rather misleading in implying that the qualities of 'everyday ordinariness' characteristic of this particular kind of meeting are characteristic of the way couples meet in romantic comedy in general. Such meetings tend to vary significantly in manner, in style (and in ideological implication) from cycle to cycle. In screwball films, for instance, there is always something *extraordinary* (something unusual, eccentric – something screwball) either about

16 Ibid., p. 30.

17 The new cycle seems to have emerged not in the early nineties, as Bygrave claims, but in the mid eighties, at a point at which the nervous romance, as the dominant form of romantic comedy, was already on the wane. 1987 seems to be the key year, with the release of *Blind Date*, *Roxanne*, *Who's That Girl?*, *Moonstruck* and *Overboard*. These films were preceded by *Splash!* (1984), *Romancing the Stone* (1984), *The Sure Thing* (1985), *Murphy's Romance* (1985), *Something Wild* (1986) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986). They were followed by *Working Girl* (1988), *Big* (1988), *Bull Durham* (1988), *Switching Channels* (1988), *My Stepmother is an Alien* (1988) and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), as well as the films mentioned by Bygrave.

18 Bygrave, 'Farewell Rambo, hello Romeo', p. 30.

the meeting itself or the situation in which it occurs. (One might cite here the meetings in *It Happened One Night* [1934] or *My Man Godfrey* [1936] or *Bringing Up Baby* [1938].) 'Ordinariness' and 'typicality' are much more characteristic of the meetings in nervous romances, while a preference for the extraordinary (once again) is one of the hallmarks of new romances. Dating, and propositions by men (in particular by men in power), meanwhile, are actually rather uncommon – especially as a way of beginning the romance – outside nervous romances and fifties and sixties sex comedies (perhaps because of their 'ordinariness', perhaps because of the inequalities of power they expose in a genre committed – however disingenuously at times – to an ideal of 'equal partnership').

These qualifications aside, the comments Bygrave makes about the 'meet cute' are, I think, interesting ones, not least because they help specify one of the points at which the ideological components of romantic comedy intersect with its formal and structural ones. Having touched on the former to some extent, it is to the latter I want now to turn.

Forms, structures and conventions

It is, of course, difficult fully to separate the formal and structural elements of a film or a group of films from ideological ones, not least because, in context, formal and structural elements tend always to perform ideological functions, or to be accorded ideological traits. Take the example of the 'meet cute'. It is clear that a meeting of some kind between the members of an eventual couple is a structural necessity in any romantic comedy (with the exception, of course, of those romantic comedies that focus on 'old love' – though even here the couple, if separated, have to be brought back into physical proximity one with another. Interestingly, there are very few comedies of old love among the current cycle). However, and in addition to the points raised by Bygrave, ideology is always at stake both in the mode and context of the meeting, and, amongst other things, in the gender, age, class, race and sexual orientation of the members of the couple. (Thus, just as there exist, to my knowledge, no romantic comedies made in Hollywood in which the couple meet under parental supervision, or as a consequence of the custom of arranged marriages, so there exist no romantic comedies in which the members of the couple are lesbian or gay or Asian or black, and only one – *Minnie and Maskowitz* (1971) – in which the couple are markedly 'old'.)

On the other hand, though, there are recurrent features of romantic comedy which seem at first sight to perform purely ideological functions, but which turn out also to perform formal or structural ones. Take the example of what might be called 'the

wrong partner'. In his discussion of screwball films, Brian Henderson writes as follows:

In *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday*, the Ralph Bellamy character is exemplar and exaggeration of conventional morality – both a character norm, against which to contrast the eccentricities of the leads, and a social norm, against which the film directs its satire. . . . In both films mentioned, the heroines plan to marry Bellamy at one point, which indicates that they waver between . . . two moralities.¹⁹

The presence of a Bellamy-type character – a would-be suitor or a possible but unsuitable partner for one or other of the members of the couple – is very common in romantic comedy. Other instances include Miss Swallow (Virginia Walker) in *Bringing Up Baby*, Joe Lilac (Dana Andrews) in *Ball of Fire* (1941), the Baron (Walter Slezak) in *Once Upon a Honeymoon* (1942), Isabel (Anne Francis) in *Susan Slept Here* (1954), Beasley (John Astin) in *That Touch of Mink* (1962), and, arguably at least, Mary Wilke (Diane Keaton) and even Jill (Meryl Streep) in *Manhattan*. (Examples from the new romances include Ray [Ray Liotta] in *Something Wild*, David [John Larroquette] in *Blind Date*, Johnny Camereri [Danny Aiello] in *Moonstruck*, Grant Clayton III [Edward Herrmann] in *Overboard*, Chris [Rick Rossovich] in *Roxanne* and Phil [George Edelman] in *Green Card* [1990].) It is clear that these characters in fact by no means always exemplify 'conventional morality', even in the screwball films. (Sometimes they exemplify the opposite: Joe Lilac, for instance, is a gangster.) However, it is true to say that they provide points of comparison with, and contrast to, one or other of the members of the couple, and that they often represent, in addition, an aspect of the personality or motivation or aspiration of that member that stands in the way of couple's formation and that thus has to be cast aside. (Joe Lilac represents the 'uncivilized' dangers and brutality, as well as the vigour, of the heroine's milieu in *Ball of Fire*, while Beasley in *That Touch of Mink* exemplifies, unalloyed, the 'typically male' lust – and attitude to women and marriage – underlying Cary Grant's proposition to Doris Day of a weekend trip – out of wedlock – to Bermuda.) Thus it is also true to say that these characters embody key ideological attitudes and perform key ideological functions.

However, it is also true to say that their presence, while frequent, is optional. Thus there are no wrong partners as such in films like *My Man Godfrey*, *When You're in Love* (1937), *The Joy of Living* (1938), *Comrade X* (1940), *The Goodbye Girl* and *Modern Romance*. Here the wrong partner's functions are performed by families and family members, by a career, by past experiences, or else simply by an excessive attachment to certain 'incorrect' values and opinions. In other films there are other kinds of variation. In *It*

Happened One Night there are two wrong partners, Shapely (Roscoe Karns) and King Westley (Jameson Thomas). In *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Lover Come Back* (1961), the wrong partner is the male protagonist as he thinks and behaves at the beginning of the narrative; in each case he pretends to woo – then actually falls in love with – the heroine in the guise of someone else; he becomes the *right* partner by becoming a combination, so to speak, of the best aspects and attributes of these two very different identities. Woody Allen in *Annie Hall* is first the right partner, then the wrong one for Annie herself. And so on. It is therefore equally true to say that the wrong partner is a *device*, that there is an irreducible *formal*, as well as ideological, component or aspect to his or her presence or absence.

Moreover, if this device performs ideological functions, it also performs formal and structural ones. The wrong partner is nearly always a source – and a butt – of jokes, gags and humour, of local comic effects. And whether as a rival for the hero or heroine, or as an embodiment, in ways mentioned earlier, of something blocking their formation as a couple, the wrong partner serves to complicate, and thus prolong, the narrative, thereby adding to its quota of suspense and helping to delay its resolution. (A similar function, of course, is performed by one of the genre's commonest – and thus most characteristic – devices: the initial hostility of the members of the couple one to another).

Perhaps the best term for elements like the wrong partner and the 'meet cute' – elements which contain both ideological and formal ingredients, and which perform both ideological and formal functions – is the traditional term, 'convention'. At any rate, in romantic comedy other such elements include the presence of 'eccentric' traits in either or both of the members of the couple, passages of 'play' (of 'having fun'), and, although the connotations of the term are heavier than I'd like, an emphasis on the 'learning process' aspects of the narrative.

Eccentricities, 'playful' deviations from sociocultural norms of behaviour, speech, action and dress, are, of course, fundamental to all forms of comedy, constituting, as they do, a major source of – and form of motivation for – comic effects.²⁰ In the field of romantic comedy, eccentricity has perhaps been associated most with the screwball cycle. However, eccentricity as such is by no means confined to the screwball cycle, for some of the roles and functions it performs are not just common to other cycles, but fundamental to the genre as a whole:

Heterosexual love may be a 'many splendored thing', but it is also a game with quite precise though not immutable sets of rules or conventions. Courtship, seduction, adultery and marriage are all highly codified and regulated activities, subject to individual

²⁰ See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 86–94.

²¹ Krutnik, 'The faint aroma of performing seals', p. 57.

²² Ibid., p. 58.

²³ See Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 54–6.

inflection but never open totally to individual control. Being so fundamental to the perpetuation of 'culture', heterosexual intimacy poses a specific paradox which is integral to the way romantic comedy operates; namely, 'affairs of the heart' are so personal and so individual and yet at the same time so readily familiar and so conventional.²¹

Eccentricity serves in general to highlight and explore – in comic terms – these tensions between the individual and the typical, the personal and the institutional, the deviant, the conformist and the conventional, that so pervade the field of love and heterosexual relationships. And it serves, in particular, nearly always to bestow signs of uniqueness and individuality – of 'specialness' – both on the couple and its members, and on their romance.

Of course, individual films and cycles of films vary the ways, the means and the extent to which eccentricity performs these functions. In general, the screwball films 'championed the exploits of eccentric individuals who deliberately set themselves against the rigidity of convention when engaged in the field of love',²² though there were always limits (the institution of marriage as such was never openly challenged, even if a number of its proprieties and practices were), and there were always exceptions.²³ The sex comedies of the fifties and sixties, on the other hand, tended to pit the 'normal' and 'typical' but anti-institutional and therefore, in a sense, anti-conventional, playboy ambitions of the male (ambitions incompatible with stable coupledness, let alone marriage) against the equally 'normal' and 'typical' but much more pro-institutional and therefore socially conventional ambitions of the female (who always wanted marriage and a family). Given this particular combination of factors and elements, the place of eccentricity within the sex comedies was always more problematic, and the making special of the couple and its members always more difficult. Specialness tended to derive from an exaggeration (or idealization) of the traits of physical attractiveness and the trappings of material success and 'playboyishness' in the man, and the traits of determination, self-esteem and 'smartness' (in every sense of the word) in the woman. A great deal of reliance was placed, in addition, on the star status of those – like Doris Day, Cary Grant and Rock Hudson – who played the couple's members. Eccentricity, on the other hand, tended to spring not from the personalities of the members of the couple, but from the unusual actions and reactions required by the contrivances of what were always highly farcical plots. As a personality trait, eccentricity tended in fact to locate itself much more securely, and hence much more permanently, within the behaviour, thoughts and actions of figures peripheral to the couple, like the wrong partner, and the hero's sidekick or friend. The latter, often played by Tony Randall, was a sex comedy staple, and may even have been a sex

comedy invention. What *was* new, certainly, was the extent to which, with the figure of the sidekick, eccentricity became a hallmark not of ebullient non-conformity but of mordant neurosis. (Frequently undergoing analysis, the sidekick became the site of all that was suppressed in the figure of the hero – insecurity, failure, sexual uncertainty, a lack of control, an inability to cope with the demands and pressures of modern life, and so on.) Later on, in the nervous romance (and in the guise of Albert Brooks or Woody Allen) neurotic eccentricity moves to the centre of the stage. The sidekick, as it were, becomes the hero (and often, in the guise of Diane Keaton or Marsha Mason, the heroine too).

In the screwball films, an additional function of eccentricity (in its ebullient mode) was often to help invest the activities of the couple – and hence their relationship overall – with the qualities of play. Actions, tasks and problems, even difficulties, arguments and expressions of mutual hostility, therefore became, simply, fun, something the couple themselves always came to recognize, if only in retrospect. Playing together, having fun together, are key elements in the ethos of romance to which romantic comedy as a whole – and not just the screwball films – seems to be dedicated. In consequence, in even the most nervous of nervous romances, in even the most battle-scarred of sex comedies, there occur passages and sequences – however brief – in which the couple have fun: juggling with a lobster in *Annie Hall*, visiting galleries, parks and museums in *Manhattan*, touring Nassau on the way to the hotel in *That Touch of Mink*. Significantly, it is relatively common for some or all of the fun to stem from playing – or from having to play – at being a married couple, for here the correlations between fun, play and compatibility are brought to the fore. This device has been most recently – and extensively – used, of course, in *Green Card*. But it has also been used – sometimes centrally, sometimes in passing – in *It Happened One Night*, *If You Could Only Cook* (1935), *It's a Wonderful World* (1939) and, with twists and variations, in *Lucky Partners* (1940) and *Overboard*.

Sometimes of course (and this is particularly common in the screwball films), the couple – or one or other of its members – only perceive the fun they have had in retrospect (the classic instance is *Bringing Up Baby*). The spectator, though, is enabled and encouraged throughout to perceive the couple's activities as fun (at least in part because they constitute a source of many of the films' comic moments – hence much of the *spectator's* fun. It is principally on the basis of the pleasure derived from this fun that the spectator is led to wish for the couple's formation). These discrepancies in perception contribute to the overall matrix of discrepant instances, layers and structures of knowledge that all narratives involve. In the case of romantic comedy, though, this contribution is crucial. For central to romantic comedy is a learning process, a process in which

the members of the couple come to know themselves as they come to know one another, and in which, in doing so, they come to develop and acknowledge compatibility and mutual love. In a nervous romance like *Annie Hall*, compatibility and love might be temporary, and there might be an additional element to the learning process, one in which the members of the couple – and in this case especially the male – have to recognize that the relationship is now at an end. Nevertheless, compatibility and mutual love always develop, and the learning process in which they are embedded always takes place. A film like *Teacher's Pet* (1957), in which the couple meet when one of its members attends an evening class taught by the other, and in which there occurs a great deal of discussion about the relative merits of formal education and learning by experience, serves to literalize, and thus to foreground, this process.

The modes, methods and contexts of the learning process, and the types of plot to which it is attached, vary considerably. Action-adventure plots of one kind or another, or plots with action-adventure ingredients – as in *Comrade X*, *It's a Wonderful World*, *Ball of Fire*, *Once Upon a Honeymoon*, and *Romancing the Stone* – are relatively common, these ingredients frequently serving to 'masculinize' the hero, or to articulate 'masculine' values. Much more common, though, are plots involving disguise, deception, and adopted or mistaken identity. In addition to those examples already mentioned, one might cite *The Richest Girl in the World* (1934), *My Man Godfrey*, *Merrily We Live* (1938), *Teacher's Pet*, *A New Kind of Love* (1963) and a number of the new romances, among them *Overboard*, *Something Wild*, *Roxanne*, *Working Girl*, *My Stepmother is an Alien* and *Big*. Nearly always, of course, the revelation of a character's true identity coincides with or precipitates the acknowledgement of a 'true self' (or true selves), of true feelings, and of true compatibility and love.

The relative contributions to the learning process of the hero and heroine – broadly speaking, which one does most of the teaching and which one most of the learning – and thus the relative weight accorded 'male' and 'female' discourses, values and knowledge varies considerably too, and of course constitutes one of the most obvious sites of the sexual politics at work in any individual film. To some extent, as already mentioned, the genre as a whole is committed to an ideal (or at least to creating an aura) of 'equal partnership'. Thus in most romantic comedies there is a degree to which the learning process is mutual, and to which the members of the couple learn from, and teach, one another. But a genuine balance is rare. Even rarer are films in which the man knows much less, and hence has to learn much more, than the woman. Perhaps surprisingly, it is the sex comedies – and not the screwball films, as has often been claimed – in which the man has regularly to learn,

and change, much more than the woman.²⁴ Even though the woman may from time to time be duped, may from time to time be unable to see through the man's machinations, the man has always eventually to learn the error of his playboy ways and accept the institution of marriage – has always therefore to accede to a relationship with the woman on the woman's basic terms. The reverse, though, is usually the case, as films like *My Man Godfrey*, *Joy of Living*, *Lucky Partners*, *Once Upon a Honeymoon* and *The More the Merrier* (1943), among many others, all testify. *Green Card* is a particularly extreme example. Here the man is 'right' or knows much more about – or is better than the woman at – practically everything – from the issue of ecology and 'ecological correctness' to cooking. *Green Card* is, of course, a new romance (one of the most financially successful, according to Bygrave). Having outlined some of the general characteristics and conventions of romantic comedy, and having highlighted some of the points at which cyclic variation has occurred in the past, it is to the specifics of the new romance that I want now to turn.

The new romance

There are four main features of the new romance that I want here to highlight and discuss. Although separable, they tend, as we shall see, not just to interact with, but also to support and reinforce, one another, thus helping to give the new romance a particular, *systematic* identity.

The first of these features centres on the style, place and function of eccentricity and neurosis. In the new romance, as in the nervous romance, eccentricity tends to remain a hallmark of either or both of the members of the couple. However, in the former, in contrast to the latter, it is either already shorn of any connotations or implications of neurosis, narcissism, 'nervousness' and self-doubt, or, if one of the members of the couple is initially neurotic or nervous, he or she is either gradually or instantly 'cured' by contact with the 'harmless', 'healthy' or 'liberating' eccentricity of the other. In *Splash!*, for instance, the feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction and unhappiness that haunt Allen Bauer (Tom Hanks) disappear when he is (re-)rescued by, and thus (re-)meets, Madison the mermaid (Darryl Hannah), whose eccentricities stem from the (almost literally otherworldly) 'innocence', 'naivete' and 'freshness' with which she perceives and approaches not just Allen but the 'human' world in general. In *Murphy's Romance*, Emma Moriarty (Sally Field) reaches what the film defines as stable and adult maturity – setting up her own business as a rancher, and finally ridding herself of any feelings of attachment to her feckless ex-husband – by coming into contact with the genial – and very mild

– eccentricities of Murphy himself (James Garner). In *Blind Date*, the somewhat nervous and conformist Walter (Bruce Willis) is ‘liberated’ by spending the evening with Nadia (Kim Basinger) (whose eccentricities are wilder but more temporary, being the product of drinking alcohol). And in *Moonstruck*, Ronnie Camereri (Nicolas Cage) is almost instantly cured of his hang-ups about his lost hand (and his lost love) on encountering the striking and eccentric (but ‘healthy’) directness of Loretta Castorini (Cher). He does not, however, lose his – equally striking and equally eccentric – intensity, and this is what serves to rescue Loretta from a potentially dull and disastrous marriage to the film’s wrong partner, Johnny Camereri (Ronnie’s brother).

In *Moonstruck*, it is Johnny who remains neurotic and nervous. (He is throughout the film devoted in an ‘irrational’, ‘immature’ and ‘childlike’ way to his mother). And this is significant. For it is a consistent feature of the new romance that it is the wrong partner, and not the hero or heroine (or sidekick, a figure who seems more or less to have disappeared from the genre at this point) who remains permanently and neurotically eccentric. (Other instances include David in *Blind Date*, Katherine Parker in *Working Girl* and Ray in *Something Wild* – an especially interesting and important instance to which I shall return below.)

Thus neurosis and nervousness are either cured or marginalized, while the eccentricities of members of the couple are either ‘mild’ in form, or markedly whimsical, or, as it were, ‘artificially’ induced (and hence temporary). Not only do these features serve to mark, twice over, a series of departures from the nervous romance, but they are also consonant in a number of important ways with the other main features of the new romance itself.

The second of these features I have already mentioned in passing – a persistent evocation and endorsement of the signs and values of ‘old-fashioned’ romance. Some of the signs (as well as the values they evoke and inscribe) crop up again and again in these films. For example, Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) in *Romancing the Stone* writes action–adventure romances in which Jessie, her fantasy hero, is a kind of knight-in-shining-armor figure who always rides to the heroines’ rescue. *Romancing the Stone* itself, of course, then reiterates a version of this fantasy (albeit with comic variations). The idea of the knight in shining armor is verbally evoked, and explicitly re-enacted, in *Pretty Woman* (1990), while only slightly less overt traces of it can be found at the end of *Blind Date*, *Overboard* and *Something Wild*, and at the beginning of *Roxanne*.

Roxanne is based on the Cyrano de Bergerac story (itself, of course, a synonym for romance). As such, it highlights the hero’s capacity for ‘poetry’ (here in the form of love letters supposedly written by the film’s wrong partner). ‘Poetry’ or ‘poetic speech’ – a striking use of phrases and words – is another recurrent device, used

either to mark the 'romantic nature' of one or other of the members of the couple, or the 'seriousness' of his or her (usually his) declaration of love. Hence Harris's words to Sara in *L.A. Story* (1990):

Sara: 'And if I were to go?'

Harris: 'All I know is on the day your plane was to leave, if I had the power, I would turn the winds around, I would roll in the fog, I would bring in storms, I would change the polarity of the earth so compasses couldn't work so your plane couldn't take off.'

In *Overboard*, Dean Proffitt (Kurt Russell) tells Annie (Goldie Hawn) the story of Arturo and Katerina as they gaze over the sea late at night, drinking champagne:

Dean: 'the legend is that they reunited at the bottom of the sea, over there, and every time you see the spray go up, it's them.'

Annie: 'Making love.'

Dean: 'For ever and ever.'

Murphy's speech to Emma at the end of *Murphy's Romance* is perhaps a little less conventionally romantic:

'if the fruit hangs on the tree long enough, it gets ripe. I'm durable, I'm steady, and I'm faithful. And I'm in love, for the last time in my life.'

It is, however, equally striking, and along with his vintage car, and the fact that he has not been to the movies 'since the Duke died', it helps mark Murphy himself as old-fashioned. Old-fashioned romance as such, meanwhile, is signified by one of the tunes he plays on the fiddle with an amateur dance band: 'It's Only A Paper Moon', by Billy Rose and E. Y. Harburg. The use of 'standard' songs of this kind is of course most marked in *When Harry Met Sally* (which also uses the device of interpolated interviews with 'old married couples' to punctuate its story and to reiterate old-fashioned romantic values). But in addition, Annie in *Bull Durham* plays Edith Piaf records (as well as quoting Whitman and Blake), Russell Proffitt recounts the legend of Arturo and Katerina with 'I Can't Help Falling in Love With You' playing in the background, and *Moonstruck* not only uses 'That's Amore', sung by Dean Martin, as its title song, it also twice features Vicki Carr's version of 'It Must Be Him'. (*Moonstruck* also features nineteenth-century romantic opera, in the form of *La Bohème* – a device repeated in *Pretty Woman*, where the opera is *La Traviata*.)

In all these films poetic speech and the signs of traditional romance do their work: 'true' – and by implication, lasting – love is finally established. (A mark of this is the number of marriage

proposals in new romances – yet another departure from the nervous romance, and itself, of course, a sign of tradition. Examples can be found in *Murphy's Romance*, *Moonstruck*, *My Stepmother is an Alien* and *When Harry Met Sally*, among others.) At this point, though, many new romances often shed the marks of eccentricity they had mobilized hitherto. New romances have difficulties in sustaining eccentricity. Hence the significance of its mildness or artificiality. It seems that, like the signs and devices that mark them, the forms of coupledness and romance to which these films are ultimately committed are so heavily conventional that the balance between deviance and conformity mentioned earlier is persistently tipped toward the latter and away from the former.

This is the third characteristic of the new romance to which I wish to draw attention. It can perhaps be best exemplified by looking in a little more detail at one particularly revealing instance, *Something Wild*. *Something Wild* begins with an apparently 'wildly' eccentric woman (played by Melanie Daniels) seeming to 'liberate' a highly conventional man (Charlie Briggs, played by Jeff Daniels). She lures him away from the routine of his work in a Manhattan office; she steals alcohol (which they both consume); she offers him mildly 'kinky' sex (even though he claims to be married); and she proposes that they both venture off on the road. It turns out, however, that they are heading for Pennsylvania in order to visit the woman's mother, and from here the film changes tack. The woman changes her appearance. (She is now blonde, not brunette.) She no longer dresses so unconventionally (she wears a white dress). She reveals that her name is not Lulu, but Audrey. And she tells her mother that she and Charlie are married. Charlie reveals to Audrey, meanwhile, that he is not really married after all (his former wife has left him). And they both head off to Audrey's high-school reunion dance. Signs of a highly conventional romance have, then, emerged with a vengeance. And Audrey has been totally stripped, not only of her wild eccentricities, but also of the connotations of instability and danger with which they had been invested. These connotations and qualities, however, do not just disappear. Instead they are transferred to a character called Ray (Ray Liotta), who appears at the dance, claims to be Audrey's husband, reveals that he is out on parole from prison, robs a bank, kidnaps Audrey, and is eventually tracked, then fought, then outwitted – and hence finally recaptured and 'contained', so to speak – by Charlie.

Something Wild, then, for all its apparent quirkiness and individuality, eventually manoeuvres its couple, and its heroine in particular, into an 'old-fashioned', 'traditional' and ideologically conventional position. Audrey sheds her wildness; Charlie comes to her rescue. It is he, not she, who outwits Ray; it is she, not he, who adopts more conventional clothing, behaviour and attitudes. This is typical of the new romance, and the fourth and final of its features

that I wish to highlight here. It is a feature perhaps most apparent in *When Peggy Sue Got Married*, a film which seems explicitly both to confront and negotiate, then finally shift away from, the conventions and ideological characteristics of the nervous romance, thus helping to establish, in so doing, the new romance and the position it tends to offer its heroines. At the beginning of the film Peggy Sue (Kathleen Turner) finds herself dissatisfied, unhappy, and on the brink of divorce; at the end, though, having journeyed back to the past prior to her marriage, she finds herself not only reconciled with her husband, but regretting nothing at all. But it is apparent, too, in *Overboard*, in which Annie finds true happiness as an 'ordinary' hardworking housewife (and surrogate mother of three), *My Stepmother is an Alien*, in which Celeste (Kim Basinger) finds true happiness as an ordinary 'human' housewife (and surrogate mother of one), *Bull Durham*, in which a woman who each season sleeps with a baseball player of her choice ends up with a man who not only initially refuses her, but who also challenges her right to choose, and even in *Working Girl*. Here, although Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) proves her worth as a broker and ends up in an office of her own, she does so only in partnership (both romantic and professional) with a man, Jack Trainer (Harrison Ford). In the process (and in a female version of the Oedipal scenario) she displaces the female boss who not only steals her ideas (and thus blocks her career), but who also is Jack's fiancée.

These then, are the predominant features of the new romance, and this is its dominant ideological tendency; one which, in countering any 'threat' of female independence, and in securing most of its major female characters for traditional female roles, very much echoes the tendencies of the screwball films.²⁵ I would like finally, though, to look briefly at the case of a new romance which, while not undermining these features (or subverting their ideological tendencies), works nevertheless to bring them to the fore, and to highlight in doing so the impossibilities of fantasy upon which romantic comedy in general usually rests. The film I have in mind here is *Big*.

Big is characteristic of the new romance in a number of ways. Its central male character, Josh (Tom Hanks), is highly (and 'healthily') eccentric. His eccentricity, his sense of fun, and the general 'freshness' of his outlook and perceptions help cure the heroine, Susan (Elizabeth Perkins) of her neuroses, her conformist tendencies, and her 'nervousness' in matters of the heart. The romance itself gives rise to 'serious', as well as comic, scenes and moments. And it is cemented when Josh and Susan dance in an 'old-fashioned' way (cheek to cheek), to an 'old-fashioned' Glenn Miller standard ('Moonlight Serenade', played by a dance band in a

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 153–5.

ballroom by the sea). Josh's eccentricities, meanwhile, are as 'extreme' as those displayed by Madison in *Splash!* or by Nadia in *Blind Date*, and, as in these instances, an explicit and markedly 'artificial' form of motivation is provided for them: Josh is not really the young adult male he appears to be to Susan; he is really a twelve-year-old boy whose wish one night at a fairground was to be 'big'.

What is interesting about this particular device is that it serves to literalize – and thus foreground – the elements of infantilism and regression usually only implicit in those representatives of eccentricity and having fun that, as we have seen, are so fundamental, not just to the new romance, but to romantic comedy in general. Usually, of course, these elements help to repress or disavow those aspects of 'adult' difficulty or 'adult' responsibility characteristic of real ('adult') relationships. (This is the specific contribution made by romantic comedy – as opposed to romantic drama – to the articulation of the fantasy of romantic union that they both tend equally to share). Here, however, their literalization brings the potential contradiction between childlike eccentricity and fun, on the one hand, and an adult relationship, on the other, to the fore. For all his feelings of commitment to Susan, and for all the joys and rewards of his relationship with her, Josh is also – still – committed to being a child, and to the joys and rewards of his relationship with Billy (Jared Rushton), his childhood friend. And so is the film. Hence Josh and Susan have finally to part when Josh is able to become a twelve-year-old boy once again.²⁶ His eccentricity and sense of fun are therefore preserved, but only – and precisely – at the expense of the romantic relationship. This does not mean that the fantasy that underlies the relationship is destroyed along with it. It, too, is preserved, but once again only – and precisely – because the relationship itself is cut short. (The way the ending works here is very similar to the way 'unhappy' endings often work in romantic drama.²⁷) What is really telling about this ending, an ending unique in the new romance to date, is that, like the film as a whole, it both draws on and works to expose the contradictions between elements which are not only fundamental to romantic comedy, but which most romantic comedies strive to render compatible one with another. (The cost, in many new romances, is often precisely the kind of ideological manoeuvring pointed to above.) Here, though, these elements, like the members of the couple, have finally to part, because their continued coexistence is rendered – and shown to be – impossible.

²⁶ The fact that Josh is male is, of course, not without significance. It is difficult, but highly instructive, to think of the film with its gender roles reversed.

²⁷ See Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and tears', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6 (1986), esp. pp. 20–2.

reports and debates

Television in a post-Soviet union

BRIAN McNAIR

Whenever called upon to write an article or present a paper about the Soviet media in recent years, I have been compelled to qualify my remarks with the comment that monitoring their development has been far from easy. Even professional journalists, who are paid to keep us informed of events on a daily and weekly basis, have been hard pushed to follow developments in the political, economic and cultural life of the former USSR. For an academic writer, who must complete projects months if not years in advance of publication, it has been rather like the tortoise trying to catch the hare.

At the end of 1990, it seemed reasonable to say that the reform process in the Soviet media had reached a watershed and would slow down for a time, allowing media workers, their audiences, and scholars everywhere to take stock. July of that year had seen the passing of a Media Law which, for the first time in Soviet history, guaranteed citizens and their representative organizations freedom of expression in journalism and the creative arts, broad rights of access to information and the means of its mass dissemination, and specified the obligations of the authorities in respect of these rights. It also defined the rights and responsibilities of media workers. Other changes in legislation concerning ownership and enterprise had created the conditions for media organizations to operate in conditions of economic independence from the Party-state apparatus, and thus to become self-financing, profit-making bodies.

Then, in early 1991, events indicated that the *glasnost* project was still vulnerable to developments in the wider economic, social and political spheres. On 16 January, Mikhail Gorbachov proposed to the Supreme Soviet that it should temporarily suspend the Media

Law, in response to what he saw as excessively critical coverage of his government's involvement in the killings earlier that month in Riga and Vilnius. Indeed, the attacks by Soviet paratroopers on the Baltic television centres, which precipitated the violence, were widely perceived as an assault by the conservatives not only on the secessionist elements of Lithuania and Latvia, but on the media which dared to support them.

Gorbachov's proposal went no further on that occasion, partly because it was intended as a 'shot across the bows' rather than a serious attempt to backtrack on legislation which had been several years in the making. But it clearly signalled that Gorbachov was under increasing pressure from the conservative wing of his party, who were losing patience with dissenting journalistic voices. Their patience finally ran out in August 1991, when, for a few tense days, an attempt was made to turn Soviet society, and its media, back to the Brezhnevian practices Gorbachov and the reformers had sought to eradicate.

The coup failed, the conservatives were decisively defeated, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Moreover, the events of August brought to an end the seventy-year-long experiment in media organization initiated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917, and ushered in a new era for the media of what we must now call the Commonwealth of Independent States.

This article examines some of the options and possible development paths now faced by the televisual media (with some reference to the press, where appropriate) in the former USSR as they, like other sections of industry, seek to make the transition to a mixed-market economy. To provide some context, the discussion is preceded with a short history of Soviet television, an outline of the Leninist principles which shaped its content, and an account of the restructuring of television which took place in the USSR between 1986 and 1991.

Soviet television: a brief history¹

Soviet historians of science, like those of many countries, have taken great pride in the achievements of their compatriots (both pre- and post-revolutionary) in the sphere of broadcasting. While the British have traditionally stressed the role of John Logie Baird, the Italians Guglielmo Marconi and the Germans Paul Nipkow, the Soviets emphasize the contributions made by Alexander Stepanovich Popov, who 'invented' the radio-telegraph on 7 May 1885² and Boris Lvovich Rosing, a professor of the Technological Institute in St Petersburg, who patented a device for the electronic transmission of visual images in 1907.³ Rosing proposed to convert electric signals into light using Crook and Braun's invention of the cathode ray

1 A full account of the development of Soviet television media up until the enacting of the Media Law in July 1990, combined with detailed analyses of their output, is contained in Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London: Routledge, 1991).

2 A. Yurovsky, *Televideniye – Poiski i Resheniya* (Moscow: Iskustva, 1983), p. 18.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

4 Ibid. Although Yurovsky acknowledges that the development of television cannot with fairness be attributed to any single individual or country. For a detailed account of the development of television technology see A. Abramson, *The History of Television, 1880–1941* (London: McFarland and Company, 1987). This author argues that Rosing's patent 'was second in importance to that of the original Nipkow patent of 1884', (p. 27).

5 V. S. Korobeinikov, *Redaktsii i Auditorii* (Moscow: Mysl, 1983), p. 96.

6 Ibid., p. 74.

tube, demonstrating the technique in May 1911. Thus, according to Yurovsky, Rosing 'is justifiably regarded as the father of television'.⁴ A Soviet Armenian, O. A. Adamyan, is credited with the world's first demonstration of colour television in Erevan in 1925, while Korobeinikov notes that the USSR was the first country to use satellites in its domestic television broadcasting.⁵

Regardless of the validity of Soviet claims as to the technical evolution of television, there can be little doubt about the importance attached to its development (and that of broadcasting in general) by the early Bolshevik leaders. On 5 February 1920, Lenin wrote to the director of the Nizhegorodsky radio-laboratory, M. A. Bonch-Bruyevich, expressing the Soviet government's 'deep gratitude and appreciation' for the work which he and his colleagues were doing on the development of broadcasting.⁶ In a country where illiteracy was commonplace, Lenin was quick to see the potential effectiveness of broadcasting – 'a newspaper without paper' – as a weapon in the armoury of 'propaganda, agitation and organization' which Bolshevik cultural policy called upon the Soviet media apparatus to become.

In the early post-revolutionary years, of course, broadcasting meant radio. But on 18 April 1921, Lenin received a letter from the People's Commissariat of Post and Telecommunications informing him that the Nizhegorodsky facility had built a device capable of showing a person speaking on the telephone. In St Petersburg, meanwhile (by now renamed Leningrad) Rosing was continuing to improve his television apparatus, and in 1929 the newly formed All-Union Committee for Radiobroadcasting announced its intention to provide five hundred television sets capable of receiving regular broadcasts in the Moscow and Leningrad regions by 1931. The USSR's first public transmission duly took place in Moscow on 1 May of that year, when staff of the All-Union Electronic Institute were shown moving paintings and photographs around a studio.

These early experiments used Nipkow's 'mechanical' disc-system to generate pictures, and development stopped in 1933 when electronic systems emerged as superior (although 'mechanical' transmissions continued to be made until 1941, when the outbreak of war with Germany stopped all television broadcasting in the USSR). Regular 'electronic' broadcasts began in 1939, with coverage of the eighteenth Party Congress. Television sets were provided for workers' clubs, palaces of culture, technology museums, and other public spaces.

The development of a television broadcasting infrastructure began in 1938, with the completion of the USSR's first 'telecentre' in the Shabalovk region of Moscow. When broadcasting resumed after the break imposed by the war, the building of telecentres and communication links throughout the Soviet Union commenced in earnest. By the end of the 1950s the technical basis for a genuinely

7 *KPSS o Sredstvakh Massovoi Informatsii i Propagandy* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1987), p. 536. This volume gathers together all official Party documents on television and the other mass media from the first Congress of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party in 1898 to the first *glasnost*-era decrees of 1986.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 536.

'all-union' television network had been established, with two channels in operation and telecentres in every republican capital.

In January 1960 the Council of Ministers of the Supreme Soviet created a Committee for Radio and Television Broadcasting, and resolutions on the 'key' role of television in propaganda work began to be issued by the Party's Central Committee, devoting the medium unambiguously to such tasks as 'mobilising the workers' and 'increasing the productivity of labour in all fields of the economy'.⁷ Henceforth, programmes were to be made 'showing the work of the Soviet people fulfilling the grandiose programme of communist construction'.⁸

Throughout the 1960s television expanded rapidly, both in terms of the amount of broadcast hours, and in the reach of the signals. On 12 July 1970 the State Committee for Television and Radio (Gostelradio) was established to centralize the organization and coordination of broadcasting throughout the USSR on what were by then three channels.

As the technical infrastructure and political supervision of the broadcasting apparatus became more sophisticated and extensive, so television gradually became a truly 'mass' medium in the USSR. Between 1950 and 1982 the number of television sets possessed by the Soviet population increased from four thousand to seventy-seven million (notwithstanding their frequently satirized propensity to explode while in use).

As Mikhail Gorbachov was consolidating his hold on power in 1986, the twenty-seventh Congress of the CPSU, held in February of that year, identified as a priority for the next (and, as it turned out, last) five year plan, the further extension of television transmission to the more than thirty million people in far-flung corners of the country who were still out of its range.

Television and Soviet media theory

The content of Soviet television, like that of all other media, was determined from the outset by a set of principles originated by Lenin (and derived by him from Marx's materialist theory of culture and ideology), refracted through the distorting prism of Stalinism, and refined thereafter by subsequent Party leaderships.

The most important of these principles was *partiinost*, or partiality, a term which for Lenin had two related meanings. Firstly, *partiinost* expressed Lenin's view that all media, and all who worked in them, expressed and reflected the interests of one class or another. The writer, journalist, or artist reflected in his or her work, consciously or subconsciously, a *tendentsiionost* (tendency). In capitalist societies, for Lenin, the majority of the media reflected bourgeois class interests – bourgeois *partiinost*. Thus it was for the

9 G. I. Kunitsyn, *V. I. Lenin o Partiinosti i Svobodye Pechati* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1971), p. 56.

10 N. N. Lipovchenko, *Ocherk Teorii Zhurnalistiki* (Moscow: Mysl, 1985), p. 41.

11 *Lenin About the Press* (Prague: International Organization of Journalists, 1972), p. 130.

12 R. Medvedev, *Let History Judge* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 526.

socialist media, conscious of the class struggle and their role within it, to adopt the perspective of the proletariat in their output – communist *partiinnost*. In this sense *partiinnost* was ‘the conscious struggle of the ideologist, theoretician, journalist, artist, for the affirmation of the interests of the proletariat’.⁹

This call for politico-ideological commitment by cultural and media workers was contrasted with the false ‘impartiality and objectivism’ of bourgeois journalism which ‘attempts to present the interests of the bourgeoisie as the interests of the whole of society, and of the workers’.¹⁰

Secondly, *partiinnost* signified Lenin’s belief that there should be a close organizational relationship between the socialist media and the proletarian party. The proletarian media should be part of the ‘wheels and cogs’ of the Communist Party apparatus, as Lenin put it in his 1905 text, ‘Party Organization and Party Literature’. ‘There can be no question’, he wrote then, ‘of revolutionary proletarian newspapers standing outside the Party of the proletariat.’¹¹ The principle of *partiinnost* called, in short, for a disciplined, committed media, eschewing the bourgeois journalistic principles of neutrality and balance, and submitting to the guidance of the revolutionary marxist vanguard of the proletarian movement.

In the context of Marx’s cultural theory (with its great stress on the notion that the material interests of social classes are reflected in the sphere of ideas) and the intense revolutionary struggle going on in Russia at the time when Lenin formulated the principle, *partiinnost* made sense. The bourgeoisie defended *their* interests through *their* media. Why should the proletariat not do likewise? After the October Revolution however, and with Bolshevik power in place, the principle of *partiinnost* fell victim to the general weaknesses in Lenin’s revolutionary theory. As the Bolsheviks took upon themselves the sole right to represent the proletariat, suppressing other parties, and monopolized the right to define what the interests of the proletariat were, *partiinnost* came to mean in practice a commitment to the Party; then, commitment to its inner circle of leaders; and finally, under Stalin, commitment to the leader. As Medvedev observes, ‘properly understood, the principle of *partiinnost* requires a writer and an artist to defend the interests of the masses, to struggle for socialist and communist ideals and against the faults which hinder realization of those ideals. . . . But during the cult, *partiinnost* was taken to mean subordination of the writers and artists to the decisions of various Party officials.’¹²

What was true for artists and writers was even more so for journalists and media workers, and continued to be true after Stalin’s death, notwithstanding the mild liberalization of the years of Krushchev’s general secretaryship. The content of television, for example, had to have, according to the principle of *partiinnost*, ‘a class ideological essence, reflecting and expressing marxist-leninist

13 Yurovsky, *Televidenye – Paiski i Resheniya*, p. 5.

ideology – the ideology of the working class, and of all the labouring masses’;¹³ propagating the Party’s view of events at home and abroad; pursuing a ‘line’ defined at all times by the Politburo and transmitted by it through Gostelradio to programme makers. Nothing which contradicted this line, or sought to subject it to critical analysis, got on to the ‘blue screen’, as the Soviets call their television. Even entertainment had to be ideologically sound, which meant, among other things, no sex, no political satire, and no western pop music.

Obyektivnost

The second of Lenin’s media principles was *obyektivnost* (objectivity), also referred to in textbooks for Soviet journalists as *pravdivost* (truthfulness). If the media were to be ideologically committed to Socialism and the proletariat, Lenin argued, they were at the same time to be objective and truthful. As one Soviet author puts it, Lenin insisted on ‘the organic unity of communist *partiinnost* and the search for objective truth in the cognitive process, and in the transformation of social activity. Such a unity is characteristic of the communist, scientific worldview. Marx’s teaching is powerful because it is correct, wrote Lenin.’¹⁴

Just as Lenin, and to a much greater degree Stalin and his successors, chose to ignore or reject those aspects of Marx’s ‘science’ which were not convenient to their hold on power, so ‘objective truth’ became what the Party leadership chose to define it as. Medvedev notes that

partiinnost and objectivity were supposed to coincide, because the proletariat and their Party do not need to conceal their shortcomings or to distort the truth. That is basically true, but it is also true that certain groups and strata in the Party . . . had an interest in concealing the truth. These did not want objectivity; they maintained their power and privileges by lies and demagoguery. That was the origins of the distortions that were covered with talk about the interests of the people. The little bosses of the arts [and media] only talked of *partiinnost*; in fact they were dominated by the most cynical pragmatism; what was to their advantage was true.¹⁵

Television’s role in the dissemination of ‘objective truth’ was crucial, since by the 1970s it had become in the USSR, as in the advanced capitalist societies, the main source of information for the majority of citizens about events taking place in the world around them. By the early 1980s the main evening news bulletin, *Vremya*, was reported to be reaching upwards of ninety per cent of the Soviet audience on a nightly basis with output which, as a rule, covered

14 Kunitsyn, V. I. *Lenin o Partiinosti i Svobodye Pechati*, p. 84.

15 Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, p. 526.

16 Korobeinikov, *Redaktsii i Auditorii*, p. 39.

only those events which could be made to make sense within the Party's current line. If, like the strikes of the early 1980s in Poland, they could not, they were ignored entirely or marginalized by being placed within a framework of 'hooliganism'. As Korobcnikov put it, when attempting to legitimize this pattern of coverage, 'socialist mass media select events from the point of view of the most advanced contemporary social forces – the working class. This is a realisation of the principle of *pravdivost* which lies at the heart of their activities. . . . Propaganda can use true or false stereotypes. . . . Socialist mass media are characterized by the use of true stereotypes.'¹⁶

Narodnost

A third media principle identified by Lenin was that of *narodnost*, or *massovost* – terms which are difficult to translate into the English language but which mean, approximately, 'accessibility to the masses', or 'in the interests of the people'. As Lenin used these terms he had in mind, firstly, a *style* of media content which would be accessible to the largely illiterate and poorly educated workers and peasants of pre- and early post-revolutionary Russia. Articles in a newspaper such as *Byednota* (The Poor Peasant), for example, had to be no more than thirty lines in length, and written in a simple, sloganeering style which would agitate and mobilize their audience into struggle.

Narodnost also required that there should be real and effective links between the people and the media; channels of communication which would allow the latter to exist as genuine vehicles for the expression of mass opinion and socialist democracy on the issues of the day.

Finally, *narodnost* expressed Lenin's view that the socialist media should tailor their output to the 'real' interests of the people, in contrast to what he saw as the sensationalist and prurient bourgeois press, making the people their 'subject'. Applying this notion to television, Soviet media sociologists note that television aims to make 'the contemporary working man [sic], with his thoughts and aspirations, the real hero'.¹⁷ Consequently, 'Soviet television and the press in general are characterized by the active involvement of the masses of working people in discussing and solving state problems, in active and creative participation in all social and political campaigns and economic decisions'.¹⁸

The principle of *narodnost* and its emphasis on the worker-as-hero explains the fact that, from the earliest times, the Soviet news and information media produced largely 'production propaganda' – coverage of the economy and, in particular, the construction of Socialism/Communism.

17 G. Gagarkin and O. Kushneva, 'Television and public opinion: problems of interaction' in *Mass Media and Public Opinion*, the Report of the Fifth Finnish-Soviet Seminar, University of Tampara, 1988, p. 52.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

While the stylistic and pedagogic implications of *narodnost* gradually lost their importance as the population became more educated and literate, the Soviet media continued to place great stress on 'audience participation' of the kind represented by readers' letters, radio and television phone-ins, studio discussions, and vox-pop surveys of public opinion about currently topical issues conducted on the streets of big cities. The extent to which anything emanating from the people of a seriously dissenting nature could be publicly aired in these contexts varied with the relative liberalism of the leadership. Under Stalin, *narodnost* permitted the masses to express at great length their undying affection for the Father of the Peoples, while readers' letters became a favoured means of exposing 'enemies of the state'. Under Brezhnev, letters critical of the government were written but rarely published. In the era of *glasnost*, on the other hand, Lenin's view of an authentically 'mass' media which would play an important role in socialist democracy came closer to realization.

Glasnost

Which brings us, finally, to *glasnost* itself (openness), the fourth of the media principles insisted on by Lenin for the guidance of the Soviet media. A recent collection of Lenin's writings on *glasnost* notes that he viewed

the bureaucratization of social life and the curtailment of *glasnost* as the consequence of the alienation of the true makers of history – the popular masses – from the political, material, and spiritual means of democratising society, and the achievement of genuine popular power. Bureaucrats, hiding behind the verbal screens of 'state secrets' and 'secrecy', in practice guarantee an opportunity for the uncontrolled and irresponsible use of power for narrow group or departmental interests. They prevent the working out of sensible, open, realistic domestic and foreign policy by the state.¹⁹

¹⁹ V. I. Lenin, *Lenin o Glasnosti* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989), p. 7.

The rediscovery by the CPSU in the mid-1980s of Lenin's deep commitment to *glasnost* might be regarded by the cynical as a convenient means of justifying the policy changes introduced by the Gorbachov administration after the April Plenum of 1986, but Lenin did indeed hold to a concept of 'openness' in matters of information and the media, which involved three things: firstly, a measure of pluralism and debate 'between comrades', albeit within a framework of overall acceptance of the materialist worldview; an insistence on the socialist state's requirement to permit democratic access (and thus accountability) to its decision-making and governmental processes, including the information and data on which decisions were to be based; and, connected with this, the importance of

criticism and self-criticism of and by Party and state functionaries. Without such criticism, he argued, bureaucratization would be inevitable, as indeed proved to be the case.

Glasnost, in all three of these senses, came under pressure from the force of events even while Lenin lived (civil war, attempted coups, economic collapse, foreign intervention, and so on). After his death, as Stalin gradually manoeuvred himself into power, the suggestion that the media should be 'open' to anything other than the officially sanctioned line was quickly abandoned. Throughout the 1920s the limits of legitimate debate were narrowed, information about the activities of the Party-state machine closed to public scrutiny, and criticism of all but the 'enemy' as it was defined by the leadership at any given time prohibited. By 1929, in the view of media historian Leonid Onikov, '*glasnost* was dead'.²⁰ By 1934, for practical purposes, debate and discussion, within the Party as well as outside it, in the media and other public arenas, had come to a halt. A state of intellectual and cultural stagnation had descended on the country, which would not be lifted until the mid-1980s and the beginning of *perestroika*.

By that time, of course, television, recognized by the Party as the most important mass medium and thus subject to the closest political control and surveillance, had become what a former editor of Soviet Central Television calls 'court television: a service for a narrow circle of the ruling elite; a medium which neither heard nor listened to the voice of the viewer, and took into account only one of the audience's tastes – sport'.²¹ (an acknowledgement of Soviet television's ample and frequently excellent coverage of all kinds of sport, including chess, football, ice hockey and tennis, in respect of which concessions were made to public taste). Otherwise, television in the USSR had by the 1980s become 'a loud megaphone for officially sanctioned information'.²²

There was no television coverage of domestic political debate (which officially did not exist). Investigative adversarial journalism in the style of western news organizations was absent. Television's coverage of international affairs was constructed largely around the theme of 'the world listens to Moscow's appeals' – appeals for world peace, for an end to the arms race, an end to bourgeois imperialism – and the universally welcoming response to these appeals clearly shown by the progressive peoples of the world.²³ Domestic news, as already noted, was dominated by 'production propaganda', extolling the virtues and achievements of Soviet socialism, while entertainment broadcasting was required to be 'enlightening' and 'uplifting'. Soviet television, in short, was to portray Soviet society in terms of what Alex Inkeles once called 'a most literal representation of the conception of paradise on earth'.²⁴

²⁰ L. Onikov, 'Glasnost i demokratiya', *Pravda*, 19 June 1988, p. 2.

²¹ Nina Grigoryantz, quoted in L. Parfenov and E. Chekalova, *Nam Vozvrashaiut Nash Portret* (Moscow: Iskustva, 1990), p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For a detailed discussion of Soviet international news coverage, and the factors shaping it, see McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*.

²⁴ A. Inkeles, *Public Opinion in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 4.

The restructuring of Soviet television

In the early 1970s Roy Medvedev pointed out that 'very highly centralized government control . . . over the means of mass communication [has] facilitated the development of bureaucracy and of massively organized and planned restrictions on freedom of expression on a scale quite unimaginable even in capitalist societies.²⁵ As a consequence, he observed, the Soviet people were 'ill-informed on the simplest level about things going on in their own country and are even more ignorant about events in the world at large. The overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens have no available means of finding things out; besides being a source of irritation and discontent, this also results in an extremely distorted view of the world.'²⁶

It also made for exceptionally boring television. Years before the onset of *perestroika* and Mikhail Gorbachov's reassertion of *glasnost* as a legitimate principle of Soviet cultural life, media sociologists and audience researchers were uncovering evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with television's content and style. Surveys revealed that audiences were becoming inattentive and apathetic to its propaganda messages.

While the Party leadership was as yet unwilling to accept the implications of such findings, a few within the television industry were. In the late 1960s a small audience-research unit was established within Gostelradio, in an effort to ascertain what the viewers wanted to watch, and thus to make television more reflective of and responsive to public opinion. Before any substantial results could be obtained, however, the unit was closed down by the then head of Gostelradio, Sergei Lapin. As a political appointee his job depended on an acceptance of the view that public opinion was something to be made and shaped by the Party, through television, rather than to be reflected in it.

In 1979 broadcasters in the union republic of Georgia began conducting audience research, the findings of which were made the basis of important programme innovations by the local channel. The head of Georgia's television committee, Nugzar Pophkadze, encouraged the development of such programmes as 'What's Your Opinion?' and 'Gallery of Bureaucrats', which used public opinion data as the starting point for investigations of corruption and crime in the republic, including the Party and government apparatus. Pophkadze pioneered in these programmes what would later become a characteristic feature of *glasnost* in the central television network – the exposure and uncensored criticism of officials and apparatchiks found to be seriously negligent in the performance of their duties.²⁷

The 'openness' of Georgian television, years before the Party sanctioned the application of the *glasnost* principle to the media as a whole, established a pattern for broadcasting which continued until

²⁵ R. Medvedev, *On Socialist Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202. In the essay from which this quote was taken Medvedev called for a law on the press and other media, pointing out that Lenin's Press Decree of 1917 had 'stressed the need for it'. In July 1990, as noted in the introduction, such a law at last came into existence.

²⁷ Parfenov and Chekalova, *Nam Vozvrashaiyut Nash Portret*, p. 13.

the collapse of the Soviet state. In Georgia and other republics on the periphery of the USSR broadcasters were willing and able to test the limits of their cultural autonomy, and go further and faster in the reform of television than their counterparts at the centre of the system in Moscow. In Estonia, for example, research into the preferences and requirements of the television audience led in the early 1980s to the local channel launching programmes specifically addressed to such previously ignored and neglected groups as the elderly, young people, and the disabled, and to broadcast live audience-participation programmes in which social and economic issues were seriously discussed on television for the first time.

Thus, one measure of the distinctive cultural climate prevailing in the republics (which, of course, subsequently took the form of calls for full political independence) was the readiness of their broadcasters to take the lead in opening up television to more democratic, accessible and popular forms of programming. Within Russia itself, regional stations such as Leningrad TV also proved to be less conservative than the central broadcasters, introducing in the early 1980s programmes such as 'Telecourier', described by Soviet media scholars Parfenov and Chekalova as 'one of the first programmes which saw its task not as that of filling in the holes in the city's economy with concrete, but removing the blinkers, and politicizing the viewers' consciousness'.²⁸

Back in Moscow television remained the prisoner of the Party's perception that as the key medium, it could not be permitted to break free of state control. Even after the nineteenth All-Union Party Conference in 1988, at which the policy of *glasnost* was officially adopted, the senior management of central television proved reluctant to move with the times. *Proshu Slova* ('I Request a Word'), which consisted of ten-minute interviews with leading political figures about aspects of their personal lives and opinions, was taken off the air despite being hugely popular with audiences unused to such intimate coverage of their leaders, in line with the Party's traditional view that politics should be above such trivialities. The innate conservatism of central television was further revealed in the fact that it did not broadcast a biographical profile of Gorbachov, the main architect of 'openness', until March 1991, six years after he became Party General Secretary.

While the Soviet press after 1986 was quite quickly transformed into a pluralistic system, central television remained the repository of Brezhnev-style journalism. As late as 1991 the occasional contributions of the respected and popular political commentator Alexander Bovin were regularly censored if they contradicted the official line.

As time passed, however, and *glasnost* was consolidated in Soviet cultural life, central television was forced to make concessions to the new climate of openness. The flagship news programme *Vremya*

²⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

29 A. Tikhomirov, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 101.

continued in the main to act as the voice of pre-*glasnost* conservatism, but the reformers succeeded in finding a place in central television's schedules for *Prozhektor Perestroiki* ('Spotlight on *Perestroika*') which sought to introduce, in the words of its originator, 'problematic tele-information to the all-union network'.²⁹ *Prozhektor Perestroiki* followed immediately after *Vremya*, and consisted of ten-minute critical investigations of specific themes such as mismanagement of the economy, bureaucracy, and the environment. In 1987 the programme was attracting sixty-four per cent of the viewing audience.

Central television also originated *Vzglyad* ('Viewpoint'), which adopted a western-style investigative approach to current affairs, and *Do i Posle Polunochi* ('Before and After Midnight') which combined political and current affairs coverage with comedy, pop music, and satire, in a manner particularly aimed at a younger audience. Both programmes were highly successful (achieving ratings of eighty-six per cent and seventy-nine per cent of the audience respectively, as compared with *Vremya*'s fifty-five per cent around the same time).³⁰

30 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

The management of central television even permitted *Vremya* to be replaced on one day of the week – Sunday – by a magazine programme called 'Seven Days', in which topical issues at home and abroad could be explored and analysed without interference from above. The presenters of 'Seven Days' were entirely responsible for their own scripts, in contrast to those working on *Vremya* who merely read scripts written and approved beforehand by others. In the terminology of Soviet television journalism the 'Seven Days' presenters were *kommentatori* (commentators, of relatively high status) as opposed to mere newsreaders (*diktori*).

The experiment ended in March 1990, when *Vremya* was restored to its Sunday slot and was declared unambiguously to be an 'official programme', representing the Party leadership's point of view, as distinct from the growing number of programmes by then being constructed independently of the official viewpoint or indeed critical of it.

Television and the Media Law

By 1989 it was possible for observers of Soviet television to comment optimistically that its development was 'reflecting the direction of social processes [that is, towards openness]. Television has not been excluded from the expansion of political pluralism, and no longer gives the viewer only the official viewpoint'.³¹ Pushed and prodded by the advance of *glasnost* in the other media, and within television by the example of broadcasters in Leningrad, Georgia, Estonia and elsewhere, the management of central television in

31 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

Moscow was slowly abandoning its adherence to the neo-Stalinist approach.

The optimism was misplaced, however. Conservatism remained deeply entrenched within the administration of Gostelradio, and as the Soviet political and economic crisis deepened the government's grip on central television was tightened. In November 1990 the former director of the TASS news agency, Leonid Kravchenko, was appointed Chairman of Gostelradio. Kravchenko, by his own admission, had 'always had Gorbachov's mandate. He has always been a Gorbachov man.'³² His appointment was interpreted by Soviet broadcasters as a signal of the President's determination to prevent the pluralism which had begun to appear in the Soviet press (and the resulting criticism of his own policies) from being replicated on television. The concessions to *glasnost* which had been made were put into reverse. *Vremya*, for example, which had begun tentative experiments in critical coverage of the economy, reintroduced such production propaganda rubrics as 'Leading Achievements'. 'News' reported within this rubric included the story that 'some conscientious workers in the Kurgan have done a good job of bringing in the potato harvest'.³³ Pressure began to be put on the experimental news programme, *TSN* ('Television News Service') which, like *Vremya*, was produced at Gostelradio's telecentre in the Ostankino region of Moscow, but which differed from the former by regularly covering domestic and foreign events from an independent, non-official viewpoint.

Conflict between the management of central television's news department and the producers of *TSN* came to a head in January 1991, after the shootings of civilians by Soviet paratroopers in the Baltic cities of Vilnius and Riga. While *Vremya*'s coverage of the events faithfully reflected the government's and Gorbachov's line on the killings, *TSN*'s journalists shot and broadcast their own uncensored film, accompanied by their own hard-hitting commentaries on it. The producer, Vitaly Tishkin, recounted in the Soviet press a few days later how his senior management had warned him that, henceforth, the programme would have to report events as instructed from above.³⁴ When he and his colleagues refused to do so, presenters Yuri Rostov, Sergei Dorenko, and Tatyana Mitkova were removed from the programme and replaced by *diktori*, who read from texts prepared by management. On 16 January, as troops were shooting civilians dead in Riga, *TSN* was taken off the air completely. Viewers were not informed of the reason.

Also in January 1991, an edition of *Vzglyad* concerning the circumstances surrounding the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze as Foreign Minister was prevented from being shown, ostensibly because it violated a Foreign Ministry directive prohibiting the broadcasting of interviews with him.³⁵

³² Yelena Chekalova, interviewed by the author in Moscow, January 1991.

³³ Y. Chekalova, 'Glasnost Tumbles Down on TV', *Moscow News*, English language edition, no. 3 (1991).

³⁴ 'TSN – pod censurai', *Nyezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19 January 1991, p. 8.

³⁵ *Vzglyad* was replaced with a programme entitled, appropriately enough, 'Images of Extremism', about the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasian republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaidzhan. These were blamed on subversive activities by the British secret service, and on the policy of *glasnost* in general.

36 'TSN – pod censurai'.
Nyezavisimaya Gazeta, 19
 January 1991, p. 8.

Responding to accusations that *Vzglyad* had been the victim of political censorship, Leonid Kravchenko suggested that the programme had been taken off for failing to meet central television's high journalistic standards. It would be restored when its producers had worked out 'a more precise elaboration of its creative concepts and thematic directions'³⁶ with the management. He had, he insisted, no intention of permanently closing *Vzglyad* down, and he fully supported what he called 'the new journalism'. But, 'none the less, one can't but be worried about the aspirations of some *Vzglyad* journalists to be politicians, and about the subjective nature of their appraisals of the complex processes taking place in society'. The deputy editor-in-chief of central television's news department expressed the organization's official position in the following way:

Vzglyad was becoming repetitive, and its popularity was waning even before the conflict with management. People were just getting bored with it, that's all. It's no great tragedy. In the end a political conflict arose, and the programme was taken off. The conflict was between management and the programme makers. Their views of the programme just didn't coincide. But it's wrong to say that the programme was banned. It's only been temporarily withdrawn.³⁷

37 From an interview broadcast on
Newsnight, BBC2, 19 March
 1991.

In the face of such attitudes, it became clear that major institutional reform of Soviet broadcasting television was a precondition of the long-term survival of *glasnost* in television. In particular, the reformers argued for the establishment of an independent television network, free of Party control and with the resources to compete effectively with Gostelradio for the audience.

The media law passed by the Supreme Soviet in July 1990 made the establishment of such a broadcasting alternative legally possible for the first time. It defined the rights and responsibilities of citizens and media workers in the sphere of information, abolished censorship, and extended the rights of non-Russian speaking ethnic groups to publish and broadcast in their own languages.³⁸ Most importantly, it removed the Party's effective monopoly over access to the ownership and control of Soviet media organs, permitting the growth of an independent media sector. Henceforth, individuals and organizations desiring to establish newspapers, journals, radio or television stations would simply be required to apply for a licence, specifying their editorial objectives, target audiences, and projected circulations. Provided that the law was not violated in such matters as pornography, national security and incitement to violence against ethnic groupings, the granting of licences was to be a formality, in which the Party had no role to play.

38 For a detailed discussion of the
 contents of the law see McNair,
*Glasnost, Perestroika and the
 Soviet Media*.

The establishment of independent media organs had been underway for some time in any case, but the new law put them on a sound constitutional base. Within six months of its enactment

several hundred new publications had come into existence completely outwith the editorial control of the Party, and frequently extremely critical of it. In the sphere of broadcasting, Moscow's first independent radio station, *Eko Moskvy* was established in offices behind Red Square, within view of the Kremlin. And preparations began for the launching of an independent television channel to broadcast to the Russian republic and provide, for the first time, a competitor to Gostelradio for the Russian audience. Russian Television finally began broadcasting on 12 May 1991, on the second all-union channel. As the new channel's director, Sergei Podgorbunsky put it just before the channel went on air, Russian Television intended to 'consistently defend the rights of citizens to receive through the mass media reliable information on the activities of state organs, public organizations, and officials'.³⁹ In particular, he noted, Russian TV's *Vesti* programme would compete with Gostelradio's *Vremya* to provide 'objective, timely information about all the complex events taking place in today's world'.

August and after

In the traditional manner, among the first targets of those who attempted to seize control of the Soviet government in August 1991 were those media whose loyalty to the conservatives' cause was in question. The independent newspapers and broadcasting organizations were immediately closed down (although many appeared illegally; there can be little doubt that the existence of 'unmediated communications' made possible by the five preceding years of *glasnost*, particularly the fax networks, contributed substantially to the defeat of the coup), while those on whom the conservatives could depend, among them Gostelradio's central television network, continued to appear.

When, in turn, the coup plotters were rejected by the Soviet people, so were their favoured media organs. The day after Gorbachov returned from the Crimea the pro-coup newspapers were summarily closed down by decree of the Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and their assets 'nationalized'. Gorbachov's appointment as head of the state broadcasting network, Leonid Kravchenko, was sacked, and replaced by the leading reformer Yegor Yakovlev, the very man who as editor of *Moskovskiy Novostii* had incensed Gorbachov in January with his newspaper's intensely critical coverage of the Baltic crisis.

In the discussions which followed about the future of Soviet television, 'independence' has been the keyword. When Russian Television came on air it was hailed as the first independent television service in the USSR. In fact, Russian TV was and remains a broadcasting organization bound to a political institution – the

Russian Parliament – and reflecting the balance of forces existing there. If Central Television under Kravchenko's leadership was the creature of the Party, so Russian TV was from the start allied with Yeltsin and his supporters.

Of course it was perfectly proper, in the circumstances, for a democratically elected president and his party to have a platform from which to present their arguments against the undemocratic, unrepresentative and (as it turned out) potentially homicidal Communist Party leadership. In the post-coup atmosphere, however, with the Yeltsin forces now firmly in control, pressure is growing for the establishment of a genuinely independent television service, free of *all* political ties.

Two models are currently being advanced for such a system. On one side are those who advocate state television, along the lines of the British public-service system. This is often referred to by its supporters as the 'BBC model'. Like the BBC, the service would be funded by the state from the proceeds of a licence fee or some other form of public taxation. Unlike the old Gostelradio, however, it would have its political independence and journalistic autonomy guaranteed by the constitution. The advantages of such a system are clear: secure funding for clearly defined public services such as information, education and entertainment, and the capability to speak to the country as a whole. This latter rationale takes on particular significance as the old Soviet Union dissolves into a looser Commonwealth. A public-service system, its supporters believe, would be a force for consensus and unity in the difficult times which lie ahead for the Commonwealth.

The opponents of state television point to the fact that the Media Law gave Gostelradio formal independence from the Party, but that this did not prevent it being taken over by the coup leaders. Instead, they favour a path of commercial development, in which political independence would be guaranteed by financial autonomy. One of the advocates of this approach has been Eduard Sagalayev, a former producer of *Vremya*. In his view, state television will always be political television. For this reason, he declined to follow those of his colleagues who moved from Central to Russian TV in 1991, and began to mobilize support for a television system which would be financially and politically independent from all state structures. In London before the coup, Sagalayev outlined his plans to establish a commercial television channel, initially on the Moscow region's sixth channel, serving a potential audience of eight million people with four to six hours of programming per day. Start up capital would be provided by issuing shares to the public (fifty-one per cent), the Moscow City Council and the Ministry of Communication (ten per cent each). Twenty-five per cent of the shares would be made available to foreign investors. Running costs would be met by a combination of viewers' subscriptions, advertising revenue, and

40 E. Sagalayev, 'News on Soviet television: breakthrough to independence', paper delivered at the International Television Studies Conference, London, July 1991.

sponsorship by foreign companies. Income would also be generated by the provision of production facilities for western programme-makers working in Moscow.⁴⁰

By the beginning of August 1991, Sagalayev had already raised 100 million roubles for the new channel, but as those who prefer the public-service solution point out, major difficulties lie ahead for any commercial media operation. By Sagalayev's own admission, 100 million roubles will not buy much broadcasting equipment at today's (hard-currency) prices, and the Russian consumer market (even in Moscow) is not at present large and stable enough for the foreign investor to be prepared to make up the difference (since the coup Sagalayev has been appointed by Yegor Yakovlev to a senior management position within Gostelradio, but at the time of writing his plans to establish a politically independent, commercial television channel in the Moscow region continue, with a likely launch date of 1 January 1993).

Even if it were successful, many producers and consumers of the Soviet media are concerned about the likelihood of wealthy foreigners and multinational corporations using their economic power to buy into and dominate the newly independent media industries. Soviet media organizations (and the independent sector in particular) are naturally torn between the need for investment, and the fear of foreign domination and 'cultural imperialism'. They are now required to operate in a commercial environment, in many cases without state subsidy, in which many of the materials required for normal working (newsprint, state-of-the-art-film equipment, and so on) are available only with hard currency. Gostelradio's budget, for example, has been cut by one third in recent months, leading it to seek increased revenue from advertising and sponsorship by foreign companies. A loan of \$5 million has been secured from the Convertia Concern, for the building of new studios. The US company Ampex is to supply Byelorussia with studio facilities worth \$1.3 million, which will be used to produce programmes for hard currency export. The Italian broadcasters RAI have entered into valuable co-production deals with Soviet broadcasters. CNN and ITN are supplying news programmes.

Cooperation of this kind will be increasingly necessary, and while it *need* not lead to domination by Murdoch- and Maxwell-style predators, the fear of takeover is more than justified by the experience of central and eastern European countries. Zoltan Jakob, senior adviser to Magyar Television in Hungary is reported recently as stating that 'when the Hungarian press allowed foreign investment, fifty per cent of it was bought by west European companies. We now have the situation where Maxwell [this was written before Maxwell's death] owns fifty per cent and forty-one per cent of two national daily papers and country press. News International owns fifty per cent of two national tabloid papers and

41 S. Turner, 'West looks set to dominate Hungary', *Broadcast*, 7 June 1991, p. 6.

42 H. Odermann, 'Media policy in East Germany', unpublished paper delivered at the symposium on 'Restructuring and the future course of the mass media in the USSR and other eastern European countries', hosted by the Korean Society for Journalism and Communication Studies, Seoul, Korea, 23 November 1991.

our largest popular weekly'.⁴¹ With Hungarian broadcasting now in transition to a commercial market-based system, Jakob expresses the hope that foreign ownership of new channels can be restricted to thirty-five per cent. But, he says, 'we do not yet know if Hungary can support the proposed expansion with such restrictions in place'.

An observer of the situation in Germany has pointed out that, in the view of many former East German citizens, the dictatorship of the Communist Party over the media has been replaced by the dictatorship of the Press Trust (the organization which controls the major part of the media of what was West Germany) and that, indeed, concentration of media ownership is now worse in the *Ostmark* than in the west.⁴²

The media industry of the former USSR faces a comparable dilemma: to what degree should it enter into sponsorship, investment and co-production deals with companies from the capitalist world? As in Poland and elsewhere in Europe, Soviet media organizations, filmmakers and producers find that the transition to a market economy has had one great disadvantage – the ending of the financial security which was provided by the centralized, state-run system (if Andrei Tarkovsky's films were not well received by the Party's ideology committees in the Brezhnev years, at least they were made, with budgets which he found difficult to raise when he came to the West). In Poland, filmmaking has virtually ceased, and the pressure is on to produce commercially acceptable films for a multi-national, global audience. Rightly or wrongly, national identities are perceived to be at risk.

The problems of transition which face the media industries exist throughout the Commonwealth, of course, and one can but sympathize with the desire of media workers to retain a healthy national production base, not only in Russia, with its potentially large and lucrative consumer market, but in the Caucasian, Baltic, and Central Asian republics, where the small size and linguistic diversity of the populations makes the commercial viability of indigenous media production more problematic (the European Community appears to recognize the difficulties facing the eastern European film industry in the coming period, and has launched a number of initiatives designed to facilitate co-production which respects and promotes national industries). That such desires can be realized without substantial foreign investment, and a concomitant erosion of cultural identity seems increasingly unlikely.

Concerns have also been expressed about the possibility of domestic media empires being erected, replacing Communist Party domination of the media with commercial monopolies. In the debate which accompanied the progression of the Media Law through the Soviet parliament it was argued that allowing individuals to own media would risk the creation of such monopolies. The right of individual ownership was approved nonetheless by 213 votes to 84 in

the Supreme Soviet, on the grounds that Soviet media law should reflect in all respects the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (as a safeguard, the law prohibits the monopoly control of any single media form by individuals or organizations). A key issue for the media of Russia and the other republics in the 1990s will be how, in the context of a developing market economy, to avoid the concentration of media ownership and control witnessed in the capitalist world during the 1980s.

A further consequence of media commercialization has been to drive them relentlessly downmarket. Media reform in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe has been accompanied by the largely uncritical adoption of western news values and media styles, including the blatant sexism and sensationalism of our tabloids. The Media Law prohibited racism, pornography, and certain other categories of content, but not the introduction of more innocuous forms of sexual stereotyping, such as those contained in the televising of beauty competitions. Few would support the reintroduction of censorship in this area, but the ease with which beauty competitions and the like have become a regular feature of the post-*glasnost* media, and the fact that this has been widely hailed by the intelligentsia as a sign of progress, is revealing of just how patriarchal and conservative Soviet society really was. In 1987, television viewers in Soviet Estonia were for the first time able to watch *Emmanuelle* (1974). In the public discussion which surrounded the transmission a prominent Estonian psychologist observed with some pride that 'eroticism', as he called it, was 'no longer the privilege of decaying imperialism'. When the star of *Malenkaya Vera* (itself a significant moment in the development of Soviet cinematography with its frank and fearless depiction of the sexual act), Natalya Negoda, appeared nude in *Playboy* magazine, this was welcomed as a long overdue recognition of the beauty of Soviet women (*Playboy*, indeed, can now be purchased in Moscow, though as yet only for hard currency). One of the most striking features of a visit to Moscow in February 1991 was the experience of seeing *Miss World, 1990* broadcast at peak time on Central Television.

The small number of women in the former USSR who adhere to a feminist worldview and who have access to public platforms are campaigning against this trend in their media but without, as yet, much success.⁴³ The equation of explicitly sexual, and more importantly, sexist imagery with democratization and political progress is partly the consequence of the relative weakness (by western standards) of the Soviet feminist movement. Soviet society was always staunchly patriarchal, as well as puritan and paternalistic in its attitudes about what people should be allowed to see, hear and read. Having abandoned puritanism in favour of 'openness' the result has been a flood of images which strongly suggest that post-

⁴³ A fuller discussion of the 'pornografication' of the Soviet media can be found in McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*.

Soviet attitudes to women and sexism remain about twenty years behind our own.

Conclusion

What, then, does the August coup and the end of Soviet power portend for what was earlier called 'the Bolshevik experiment in media organization'? Is there anything worth preserving in the leninist heritage? Is there a valid distinction between Lenin's authoritarian approach to the early Soviet media, formed and shaped by perceived threats to the world's first socialist state, and Stalin's cynical transformation of them into organs of his own personal power?

Before the coup, Soviet intellectual opinion was split. On the one hand there were those who stressed the continuity between Lenin's cultural policies and those of Stalin, arguing that the latter merely refined and radicalized a process of stifling dissent and discussion which had begun with Lenin himself. For this group, the return to 'authentic Leninism' espoused by the Gorbachov government was a totally misconceived project. For them, nothing short of liberal pluralism on the familiar western model would do.

On the other hand, the view of Gorbachov and his supporters was that one could find in Lenin's thinking all the concepts and principles which underpinned the modern *glasnost* campaign, and that the Party's task was to rediscover and reclaim the radical, progressive kernel of his thinking on this and other matters.

From a materialist theoretical perspective, and from the experience of capitalist media development, one can have some sympathy with Lenin's critique of the liberal pluralist concept of 'press freedom'. One can also have some support for his definition of press freedom, founded on positive rights of access to the mass media for the majority. And it is certainly true, as the Gorbachov wing of the Party argued, that Lenin did at various times both before and after the October Revolution, support the pursuit of 'open polemics', of criticism and self-criticism in the media and elsewhere, and of openness in all affairs of the state and government. Yet he failed to ensure the survival of any of these concepts, just as he failed to prevent Stalin's bureaucratic takeover of the Party apparatus, even while he was still alive. In media and cultural policy the leninist approach can be said to have failed, in so far as it demonstrably gave birth to stalinism.

The question yet unanswered (and this applies to all aspects of the marxist-leninist experience) is: did it have to do so, or was there an alternative cultural policy which might have avoided bureaucratic despotism and its corollary, cultural totalitarianism?

Even before the coup, it might be thought that, for the Soviets,

the answer to this question was given when the inhabitants of Leningrad decided to rename their city St Petersburg. After the coup, and the final collapse of Communist Party authority, it may hardly seem relevant even to pose it. Yet there are those who, observing some of the trends discussed in this essay, are arguing for systems of media organization which are neither completely 'free market' nor subordinated to authoritarian political control. The next few years will reveal if, in the face of internal economic collapse and external predators, their views will be heard.

A final note on the Media Law

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union as a legal entity, the Media Law of 1990 no longer carries authority in the newly independent republics, whose governments will eventually introduce their own more or less liberal media legislation. The law in Russia can be expected to follow the basic shape of the most recent Soviet law, although some would like written into it constitutional guarantees that there can be no interference in media activity by any governmental organization, at whatever level, thus preventing a repeat of what happened in August 1991. At the time of writing, these issues remained unresolved.

report

VIPER: The Twelfth International Film and Video Convention, Lucerne, 22–6 October 1991

Hardly anyone associates Switzerland with a film or festival culture, let alone avant-garde films or experimental videos. The first things that spring to mind when thinking of this country are the beautiful landscapes and culinary delicacies. However, in Lucerne, a small town on Lake Vierwaldstätter, these elements – tourist attractions and film culture – are combined. For the last twelve years the annual international film and video festival, VIPER, has taken place here, the only festival of its kind in the whole of Europe, apart from the inaccessibly huge media conference held in Osnabrück, Germany.

Founded in Switzerland at the time of the youth riots (which admittedly were concentrated around the capital city, Zürich), the festival has since developed from an 'anarchic' forum, a 'countercultural' event, then including theatre, performance and art, into a professionalized, state-funded forum for the discussion of avant-garde film and experimental video. Meanwhile in Switzerland, Lucerne has become to video what Solothurn is to film – since 1985, the *Videowerkschau Schweiz* has represented one of the festival's major events and simultaneously formed the basis for its public recognition, state sponsorship and the interest of the (domestic) press. As the festival gains recognition in its own country, and indeed abroad, the evermore urgent question arises of what form the festival should take: in the face of an ever increasing abundance of video productions, what are VIPER's aims? What kind of people does it want to serve? The foreign audience, at least, is more interested in the films and the special showings than in the videos. Merging the two media (and their audiences) seems difficult as

their relationship is unclear (even to the festival organizers).

Although VIPER has become more professional – it has permanent offices, and two women and two men work for the festival all year round, (although only one post carries a regular salary). It has consciously retained a workshop format, sometimes causing the festival to appear temporary and chaotic to the visitor, but in a pleasant way rather than a disruptive one. Moreover, VIPER has remained a very intimate, easily accessible festival, which has a faithful following who meet up here each year. The strong presence of the filmmakers themselves is immediately striking compared to other festivals, where critics often form the main core of visitors. An important criterion for *all* of the spectators is fulfilled here with outstanding consistency, even when compared to similar smaller festivals: although this year all of the events took place, unusually, in the one room, which sometimes became cramped and stuffy, and where one stumbled over the chairs in the dark, the projections were always of an excellent quality and the timetable strictly adhered to. But the quality of projection could not quite be reconciled with the all too frequent lack of quality in the films themselves and the somewhat arbitrary structure of the programme.

Despite the crowds of visitors for this programme, *Videowerkschau Schweiz* is a problematic item for a festival which has devoted itself to the 'avant garde', or, at least, which would like to reflect upon the whole concept critically and document it historically. In the first few years, as long as video remained a rarer phenomenon, showing every work which had been submitted was justified. In the meantime, the number of submissions has increased at a phenomenal rate – fifty-five hours worth in this year alone – and consequently the festival policy of producing a programme which includes all submissions, on an

informative basis, seems inadequate: it frustrates and expects too much of the audience, particularly in a medium in which the short form predominates and the audience has to readjust every three to ten minutes. In the face of so many self-satisfied Techno-styles, sentimental, autobiographical diary-type entries, ritually repeated standard effects like wipes frame in frame and colouration which are in no way related to the contents, the abundance of available material demands a new programme strategy. A more careful and more consistent selection would have prevented a certain amount of ill-humour and boredom. Admittedly, it also became clear that the video medium is being used a great deal for historical projects and for political documentary purposes. I did not, however, follow up on these programmes and therefore cannot allow myself to make any conclusive judgement about them. I think, though, that I am justified in stating that a mistake is being repeated here which was recognized very quickly by the politically motivated *cinéma vérité* or *cinéma direct* movement of the late sixties induced by the Apparatus debate – that is, the realization that the ‘mere’ technical means already contain and convey a certain ideology and that the aesthetics convey meaning. The speedy documentation made possible by video sometimes seems to fall behind this recognition. In Lucerne the so-called ‘political’ videos seemed to, once more, indicate a lack of continuity in politically motivated aesthetic discussions – a lack of connection between theory and practice.

Altogether, the technical possibilities of the medium – and this was confirmed by many of the images – seemed to invite carelessness and superficiality. The status of a ‘work’ is attributed much more quickly to a film than to a written text, critical reflection seemingly prevented by the seductive evidence of the visual product. In this case, the programme organizers would have to assume responsibility and risk rigid selection

and limitation of the programme or instigate more fundamental discussions.

The festival organizers travelled to various European and non-European towns for the international part of the festival: they visited other festivals and had moreover curated two special works – the retrospective, *Found Footage* (discussed below), and the programme entitled *The Dream Machine* after a film by Derek Jarman, John Maybury, Michael Kostiff and Cerith Wyn Evans. Otherwise, the sixty-four films, from twenty-two countries, were arranged, sometimes somewhat arbitrarily and poorly named according to themes such as ‘Lethal History’, ‘Repressed Memories’, ‘Filmic Narratives’, ‘Death Metaphors’, ‘Contemplation of the Countryside’ and ‘Women, Bodies, Floods’.

Three films in particular stick in my memory. *Fields* (16mm, 13 min., Lebanon/USA, 1990/91) by Christine Dabague sexualises the process of grief over a dead man. Sensuality arises in an intimate, fearless handling of the dead body, interlaced with memories of the past and with present physical experience. Simultaneously, the death of an individual is placed within the context of a war.

History and Memory (U-matic, colour and b/w, 30 min., USA, 1991) by Rea Tajiri seizes upon the question ‘Who chose what story to tell?’, referring to the wholesale internment of Japanese Americans in concentration camps after the attack on Pearl Harbour. The personal memories of the people concerned are combined and confronted with the media’s version of the story in such a way that a re-writing of history occurs.

You Take Care Now (16mm, 10 min., Canada, 1990) by Ann Marie Fleming makes the attempt to envisage pictorially the memories of a rape, without constructing a ‘graphic replay’. The soundtrack stands in for and is at odds with the images, this divergence creating ironic distance without surrendering the intrusive effect of the

occurrence on the everyday behaviour and fantasy world of the protagonist.

Especially gratifying for this year's visitors to VIPER though were the two special programmes mentioned above. *Found Footage* devoted itself to two classic American artists of this 'genre', Bruce Connor and Ken Jacobs, and presented their work in a comprehensive retrospective. This 'series' with films made from 'found' and reworked material is to be continued over the next few years. For the very reason that in the last few years a tendency has prevailed, particularly among young filmmakers, of working with pre-existing material and completely abandoning the act of filming – at the VIPER convention, extraneous material was used in almost one third of the films – these films could have been discussed on the one hand from a historical viewpoint (for the history of this 'genre' goes back into the first decade of this century) and, on the other hand, in connection with this recent tendency. There was no time allowed for this, however, a point brought before the organizers during the course of the festival which they took to heart: next year the *Found Footage* retrospective is to take on the character of a workshop.

A similar reproach applies to the second special programme, *The Dream Machine*. The films and videos presented in this programme quite clearly invited discussion which was only cursorily introduced in Lucerne. The programme featured films from a group of filmmakers which had loosely formed itself around Derek Jarman, and which was mainly active in the seventies and early eighties. John Maybury, Cerith Wyn Evans, Michael Kostiff and Holly Warburton belonged to this group. In their films they

consciously detach themselves from the classical avant garde: they take steps against the films of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, countering their ascetic policy and refusal of narration and representation with a voluptuous visual excess, which refers back to the aesthetics of the pre-Raphaelites, to Romanticism and Symbolism. John Maybury's works formed the central focus of the programme and inspired quite varied reactions from the audience, ranging from indecisive ambivalence to evident annoyance at his commercial orientation and unconcealed joy at his tackiness and camp aesthetic. Maybury, who has produced video-clips for Sinéad O'Connor, Neneh Cherry, Boy George and The Smiths, among others, quite openly acknowledges popular culture and wants to reach many people. In this context, it was interesting to see his early films, such as *Circus Logic* from 1983/4, which have a quite different character from his newer commercial video-clips. A good feature of the programme was that it made possible this comparison – though many bemoaned the lack of an organized discussion about how these films are caught in a strained relationship between art and commerce: do they represent utilitarian adaptability or creative redefinitions of existing image worlds?

This too was a reason for the organizers of VIPER to worry about how the festival should be arranged in the future. For it is becoming clear at smaller festivals that a thematic orientation and organization, which means providing a work-shop format rather than a large market of information, both yields more benefit to its audience and better meets the interests of a professional public.

Annette Brauerhock

(Translated by Frances Birrell)

debate

SIFT: a filmographer's database

I am pleased to report that Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's recommendations for good filmographic practice reflect the analysis which underpinned and was incorporated into the development of the British Film Institute's database which we call SIFT (Summary of Information on Film and Television), and that although information can be deficient, the theory as established through international standards and cataloguing codes is in quite good shape.

SIFT has been designed to accommodate data about a variety of aspects of film, television and video, including information on people, organizations, events, literature and related materials such as scripts and stills.

However, the largest proportion of the data relates to films, television programmes and video titles and it is this aspect of the system which is relevant to Nowell-Smith's comments about filmography.

The SIFT database design provides for an ideal situation. The basic target is to build up accurate and reasonably full information about the original release form of feature films made throughout the world and about television programmes transmitted in the UK (plus some additional information on US and Australian television productions). Added to this there is more detailed cataloguing of the National Film Archive's collection; references to other sources of information and comment; a brief indication of other holdings such as scripts and posters; and data prepared for the British National Film and Video Catalogue with its very specific subject cataloguing of (mainly short) films and videos.

The specially designed system had to be able to accommodate a range of different

needs, both immediate and long term. The initial development phase (1983–8) concentrated on Library and Information Services (LIS) indexing and National Film Archive (NFA) cataloguing, but the system was designed to be used across the Institute.

LIS compiles and indexes information from published material – trade papers, publicity, critical journals, reference works – and these are usually concerned with the original release. It also catalogues its holdings of scripts, campaign books, and personal and company papers. The NFA needs to register the acquisition of a particular version of a film or television programme and to provide detailed cataloguing of specific prints.

In addition, the terms of our EEC grant required the database to be hospitable to information to be added by other national organizations. (We originally proposed a joint project with the Deutsches Filmmuseum Frankfurt and discussions with colleagues at the Filmmuseum helped us to clarify our needs, as did liaison with other overseas colleagues, including our involvement in the compilation stage of the Library of Congress and FIAF Cataloguing Rules.)

In order to provide a basic structure which would be suitable to these different needs, we defined three different levels of data:

Data on individual productions common to all their manifestations such as production credits and subject matter (what Nowell-Smith terms invariant information).

Data about different (often national) versions of an individual production such as subtitling, censorship cuts, whether re-issued in a double bill, or re-edited for television transmission within a series.

Data on individual copies of the production, including details of location, physical condition and ownership.

LIS and NFA staff are responsible for

inputting and editing SIFT data (we went live in 1988) and add 17,000 new title records each year. The total combined database currently includes half a million titles.

Inevitably initial efforts have concentrated on accommodating the pre-existing card-index information within the new system, so that it can be used by a busy library and information service, rather than on making full use of the scheme's sophisticated design. The other major tasks have been to deal with problems caused by bringing together three separate but overlapping sets of records, where different cataloguing practices have been applied in the past, and in coping with variations endemic in the creation of card records over a fifty-year period, complicated by poor quality keyboarding in some areas.

A relational database is a hard task master. There is no room for fudging. This person or company or title is or is not the same as another of the same or very similar name. If the name Harrison Ford appears on two separate title cards it is not essential to know whether or not this is the same individual. But when all the names go into a single file it becomes important to know that there are two actors of this name. (The first Harrison Ford worked in silent films and there are seventeen titles on SIFT associated with him. The second is our contemporary.) We have a quarter of a million names on SIFT. Realistically we cannot hope to research all of them, but we are doing our best to identify personalities and their associated credits.

The system has been designed to accommodate very sophisticated levels of information. There is provision for up to 999 versions of a single title and for attaching to these, where appropriate, specific data relating to format, colour, language (dubbing and subtitling), run time, length, and date of release or transmission. The system also allows for the addition of version-specific credits, such as the actors responsible for dubbing local language versions. The

production screen provides for production start and end dates, details of studio and locations used and frames per second (for silent films) as well as original format and run time (aspect ratio is due to be added).

The original screen designs for release and production included notes fields but we are currently adding additional free-text screens to accommodate more detailed annotations, such as might be incorporated in an encyclopaedic type publication, designed for use by our colleagues in BFI Publishing.

Film cataloguers' practice is to use title, country and year for a short identification and I was successful a few years ago in getting a BSI standard for bibliographic citation changed from title, director and year, since non-fiction films and videos frequently lack a 'director' credit. Categorization by 'country' is not unproblematic, though, and librarians in the field have devoted quite a bit of time to devising guidelines for ordering the citation of countries involved in co-production. This is crucial since the main country of origin frequently determines the original release title. LIS practice has always been to take the title of original release in the country of production apart from a period when the UK title of US films was preferred (unscrambled during automation) and this practice is codified in the FIAF rules.

Film cataloguers are agreed on preferring date of release (or transmission for television) in country of origin. Even now not all countries have copyright registration systems in place and in many cases the information can only be established by viewing the actual work. SIFT displays all the key dates on the title-summary screen. The system automatically searches for the best available date in the preferred order (agreed by a Film and Television Archival Cataloguing conference in Washington in 1981). Therefore dates are displayed in terms of original release (or transmission), followed by copyright date and production dates, and

this information is used in the title-list displays (which are being modified to allow the user to distinguish between the various dates). However, even if the country of origin is clear, the 'release date' is not unproblematic and the FIAF rules deliberately failed to define the term. LIS pragmatically takes the year of review in the appropriate national trade paper as its main source of release date. The SIFT release screen also provides the date of premiere (if this is identified) and for unreleased works and footage.

Since the database was implemented much effort has gone into a series of discussions among the different inputting departments to ensure a standard practice and to deal with unanticipated cataloguing problems so that the data will be as consistent as possible.

The major data 'cleaning' exercise (involving a team of four individuals) comes to an end in March 1993. However the BFI is rich in filmographic and teleographic expertise and we are beginning to think of ways in which this expertise can best be fed into enhancing and amending SIFT. Already the Monthly Film Bulletin credits which we have had keyboarded are being edited onto SIFT and this promotes further 'cleaning' of personality data. This task should be completed in 1994. Meanwhile software modifications to allow direct keying of Monthly Film Bulletin records and of National Film Theatre documentation are planned for 1992-3.

Gillian Hartnoll

reviews

review:

Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds), *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Soviet Cinema Series). London: Routledge, 1991, 256pp.

TONY PEARSON

Routledge's Soviet Cinema Series promises quickly to establish itself as an intellectual forum for a major, and much needed, reappraisal of the classic Russian and Soviet cinema. Preceded by *The Film Factory*, a copiously annotated collection, with extensive contextualizing commentaries, of translated primary source documents covering the years 1896 to 1939,¹ the series is now bringing forward a number of influential studies aimed at broadening our understanding of a pioneering cinema too long burdened with hitherto unchallengeable myths, persistent stereotypes, rigid periodizations and implausible hierarchies. *Inside the Film Factory* delves deep beneath the surface of the 'film factory' to uncover layers of early Soviet cinema hitherto consigned to the critical periphery.

A handful of colossi form a solidified pantheon dominating traditional histories and critiques of Soviet cinema: Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov, Dovzhenko, Kozintsev, Trauberg. Only one of these (the inadequately known Kuleshov) is accorded a chapter in *Inside the Film Factory* (though the others are frequently cited), for it is the editors' project to question the hegemony of such legendary figures within Russian and Soviet film culture on either side of the October Revolution, by bringing to the fore industry participants and developments hitherto largely neglected both in the West and in the former Soviet Union. Another major aim is to:

¹ Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988).

examine Soviet films in the context of Soviet cinema, and Soviet cinema in the context of the political and cultural history of both the Soviet Union and the world at large. (p. xv)

If this might today seem a fairly obvious approach, it has not been a common one in the past, leading to inevitable distortions in our understanding of classic Soviet cinema. But while *Inside the Film Factory* sets out courageously to reexamine old agendas and to propose new ones, editors Richard Taylor and Ian Christie are careful to avoid substituting one orthodoxy for another. They are as much concerned with questions of industry, audience, revenue and politics as with authorship, style and aesthetics. Nor, as is so often the case with writings on Russian culture, does the anthology restrict itself to a purely Soviet frame of reference, for its contributors demonstrate a keen awareness of the intersections of Soviet with world cultural history.

Inside the Film Factory contains a short editorial introduction, ten essays from eight contributors – leading scholars and critics working in the USA, the Soviet Union and France, as well as the UK – and an edited interview. Four of the essays – Yuri Tsivian's 'Early Russian cinema: some observations', Ian Christie's on *Aelita* (Yakov Protazanov, Mezhrabpom-Rus', 1924), Denise Youngblood's on Protazanov's directorial career and J. Hoberman's on Soviet Yiddish cinema – have been specially written for the volume, while the others are revised versions of previously published pieces. All, however, are comparatively recent and most postdate the commencement of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*. The expedient of reprinting at the expense of complete origination is, in this case, a strategy to be welcomed, since it is precisely the conjuncture and intersection of the disparate essays that provides the real strength of this anthology.

Prerevolutionary Russian cinema has always been inadequately explored, but age and 'primitiveness' have never seemed adequate grounds in themselves for such neglect. Anyone reading Jay Leyda's hundred or so pages on the cinema before 1917 has their curiosity aroused, and their appetite whetted for a rich harvest of films overshadowed by the later achievements of the Soviet propaganda cinema machine.² After the Pordenone Soviet cinema event in 1989, which brought many restored prints of the earliest Russian films to the West, Soviet researcher Yuri Tsivian co-edited the first substantial collection of writings on the subject.³ Tsivian draws upon this for the opening essay of *Inside the Film Factory*, an amusing sketch of the very first Russian films and genres, informed by the reminiscences of industry participants and eye witnesses. He draws attention to the early Russian cinema's difference from mainstream international production of the period; and makes special mention of its nineteenth-century theatrical links, which, along with influences

2 Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960, 1973 and 1983), pp. 11–110.

3 Yuri Tsivian et al. (eds), *Testimoni silenziosi: film russi, 1908–1919* ('Silent Witnesses: Russian Films, 1908–1919') (Pordenone and London: British Film Institute, 1989).

from classical tragedy adapted for popular consumption, contributed to the evolution of a distinctive 'Russian style' marked by slow, statuesque action and a singular propensity (contrary to the Hollywood model) for unhappy endings.

Echoes of prerevolutionary cinema are also present in Denise Youngblood's excellent study of Yakov Protazanov (1881–1945). The career of Protazanov, hitherto 'the forgotten man' of this national cinema, spanned the years 1911 to 1945. He has been unfairly dealt with by film historians too often misled by his phenomenal acclaim at the box office and long association with the populist studio Mezhrabpom-Rus' into characterizing him as a mere *metteur en scène* as distinct from an acknowledged *auteur* in the Eisenstein/Pudovkin tradition of high culture. Youngblood contends that the social history of Soviet cinema is significantly distorted without attention to its most popular – indeed its *only* truly popular – exponent. She makes a convincing case for Protazanov as *the* transitional paradigm of Soviet popular culture, an important bridge between the Russian past and the Soviet present, who had 'an uncanny understanding of what viewers liked' (p. 104) and who, eschewing the avant-garde excesses of his contemporaries, could maintain a consistently prolific output of entertaining material.

Ian Christie's essay on Protazanov's controversial 1924 science-fiction film *Aelita*, 'undoubtedly the major event in Soviet cinema before the international breakthrough of *Potemkin* in 1926' (p. 81), further enhances the claims to centrality of this charismatic director-scenarist, and compellingly argues for a fuller study of both Protazanov and the insufficiently historicized Mezhrabpom-Rus'. But the problem remains, at least for the moment, of the unavailability, outside of the Soviet archives, of films for study. Christie's proposed British Film Institute/Pacific Film Archive retrospective of all Protazanov's films is likely to benefit only the metropolitan student. What is urgently needed is Soviet collaboration in the wide distribution of the films within the educational sector. Meanwhile, Christie's subheading, 'Has anyone actually *seen Aelita*?' serves to underline this fundamental impediment to further research.

Vance Kepley's industrial history of the cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, 'The origins of Soviet cinema: a study in industry development', which contains further interesting insights into the much maligned Mezhrabpom-Rus' studio, takes the reader from Lenin's cinema nationalization decree in 1919 through the period of War Communism to the complications of the NEP and the industry capital accumulation that eventually provided for a secure cinema industry under Soyuzkino after 1933. On the way, Kepley dispels the myth that nationalization was the proactive, strategic or even instantly universal, phenomenon popularly supposed, and describes the process instead as a reflex, stopgap, piecemeal measure, taken out of necessity. He also draws attention to the sheer resilience of

the private film production companies in the years of War Communism before the NEP once again encouraged private enterprise.

Kepley's other essay in *Inside the Film Factory* is a revision of his 1979 article about the impact of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) on Soviet filmmakers.⁴ Here again he is concerned to question assumptions too long taken for granted, suggesting that, despite Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's enthusiastic celebration of Griffith, the influence on the Soviets of *Intolerance* should be kept in proportion. Moreover, he uses the film's Soviet distribution history after 1919 and its dubious ideological orientation (certainly from a Soviet standpoint) to raise serious doubts about its status either as artistic inspiration for, or as traceable precursor to, the central Soviet theory and practice of montage.

Other figures and trends habitually consigned to the critical periphery are examined in the remaining essays. Boris Barnet, another director of popular entertainment films, is the subject of an intriguing portrait by Bernard Eisenschitz. Soviet scholar Mikhail Yampolsky breaks with more traditional accounts of the enigmatic Kuleshov in focusing upon his new 'anthropology of the actor'. A revised version of Ian Christie's 1982 *Screen* article on early Soviet sound cinema;⁵ a revealing interview with the quixotic, antiestablishment Alexander Medvedkin; J. Hoberman's fascinating essay on the oft-neglected Soviet Yiddish cinema of the early Stalin years; and Richard Taylor's illuminating study of the powerful 1930s industry mogul, Boris Shumyatsky, complete the collection.

Inside the Film Factory does indeed, as its subtitle proposes, advance new approaches to Russian and Soviet cinema. It also admirably realizes fresh evaluations of encrusted positions. But the price of the book (£40), which appears in hardback only, must be a considerable deterrent to many of its potential readers. The same is true of its predecessor *The Film Factory* and of the forthcoming titles in the Soviet Cinema Series. If Routledge could issue these excellent books in an affordable paperback edition, they would be doing a greater service to the reappraisal of Soviet cinema by ensuring that ownership of these important volumes does not remain the exclusive preserve of well-endowed libraries.

Inside the Film Factory, moreover, whets an appetite which is not easy to assuage when most of the films discussed are unavailable. Many potential readers no doubt already hanker for improved distribution of the films of Kuleshov; but on discovering or rediscovering Protazanov, Barnet, and the prerevolutionary pioneers, many will regret that more of this work is not available for viewing and study in the West. While Soviet cinema studies have benefited greatly in recent years from video releases of some of the classic Soviet films, much more remains to be done in this area. The appeal of *Inside the Film Factory*, and the promise of the series' forthcoming volumes, makes this all the more urgent.

4 Vance Kepley, 'Intolerance and the Soviets: a historical investigation', *Wide Angle*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1979), pp. 22-7.

5 Ian Christie, 'Soviet cinema: making sense of sound', *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1982), pp. 34-49.

review:

Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Theories of Representation and Difference Series). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, 260pp.

ANNEKE SMELIK

While classical Hollywood cinema has always served as the main point of departure for feminist film theory, attention to women's cinema has on the whole been sparse and scattered. However, things seem to be changing of late. Having reached an apotheosis in the late 1980s in numerous rigorous and insightful readings of yet more Hollywood films, feminist film theory has come of age. The time has surely now come for the theoretical process to advance itself further by tackling contemporary women's cinema in its full range and diversity. Judith Mayne's *The Woman at the Keyhole* is one of a number of recent books dedicated to this project.¹ Since Mayne also tackles some of the principal dogmas of feminist film theory to have emerged from its almost exclusive attention to Hollywood, her book is a timely intervention in the field of feminist film studies.

Mayne's objective is to examine contemporary women's films which reinvent cinema as a narrative and visual form, placing them within the context of feminism and film theory. The ambiguity of the term 'women's cinema' is carefully retained throughout the book 'to suggest simultaneously the enormous impact of Hollywood's versions of femininity upon our expectations of the cinema, and the representation of other kinds of female desire'. (p. 5) It comes as rather a surprise, then, that large parts of the book focus upon Hollywood films which can in neither sense be regarded as 'women's cinema' – though this has partly to do with the way it is organized. *The Woman at the Keyhole* is composed of three more-or-less

¹ See also: Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Counter-shot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Two books discuss women's films in specific national contexts: Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti (eds), *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

autonomous sections, each concentrating on a critical concept negotiating the shift from Hollywood to women's cinema: the screen, female authorship, and 'primitive' narration.

In a move which recalls C.S. Peirce's concept of the ground as a structuring relation between object and representation, the first section displaces the privileged concepts of feminist film theory ('the gaze' and 'the spectacle') by focusing on a different component of the cinematic apparatus: the screen as the ground of both image and gaze. (p. 36) Mayne's notion of the screen may be considered groundbreaking: not only in the ordinary sense of the word, but also in that it shifts the ground, changing established habits within feminist film theory.² The screen's ambivalent function – as both passage and obstacle – makes it a privileged figure for 'feminine' narration in women's films, as Mayne shows in her stimulating readings of *Redupers* (Helke Sander, 1977), *Illusions* (Julie Dash, 1983), *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Patricia Rozema, 1987) and *The Man Who Envied Women* (Yvonne Rainer, 1985). The metaphor of the ambiguous screen surface accounts for these films' simultaneous complicity with, and resistance to, dominant film forms.

While the figure of the screen proves most productive in interpreting contemporary women's cinema, Mayne's subsequent argument is disappointing. Although it might be true, as Mayne contends, that women's films push at the limits of theory and criticism, the structure of her book actually detracts from this important point. For by grounding her pivotal and innovative insights in classical Hollywood cinema, then applying these insights to contemporary women's cinema, Mayne in the end fails to deliver on her promise to undo the rigid opposition between Hollywood and alternative cinema. Nor does she make the necessary move back to theory in order to extend its limits further: for example, the notion of the screen as the privileged site/sight of cultural exchange could have been deployed to elaborate the Lacanian theory of the gaze.³

Female authorship has long been a neglected category in feminist film criticism, which is partly due to eager recitations of the dangers of essentialism by feminist critics, Mayne, however, does not shy away from these 'essentialist detectors' (p. 90), and courageously tackles the theoretical difficulties associated with the idea of authorship in cinema: 'The notion of female authorship is not simply a useful political strategy; it is crucial to the reinvention of the cinema that has been undertaken by women filmmakers and feminist spectators'. (p. 97) It is perhaps no coincidence that the lacuna around authorship leads Mayne to a further structuring absence of feminist film theory: that surrounding lesbianism. She draws attention to the frequently reproduced images of Hollywood director Dorothy Arzner, fully recognizable in her lesbian identity; images which stand in stark contrast to silence surrounding Arzner's

2 For a lucid discussion of Peircean semiotics, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 167–82.

3 Kaja Silverman makes this suggestion in 'Fassbinder and Lacan: a reconsideration of gaze, look, and image', *Camera Obscura*, no. 19 (1989), pp. 54–85.

lesbianism. Lesbian desire – at once so over(t)ly visible (not only in photographs of Arzner, but even more so in contemporary women's cinema) and yet disavowed – points compellingly to a fetishistic dynamic at work in feminist film theory. Mayne sees Arzner's authorial inscriptions precisely in the problematization of (lesbian) pleasure: in the relations between and among women and in marginal lesbian gestures. Although Arzner's lesbian irony is lost on me, I agree wholeheartedly with Mayne's critique of the homophobia implicit in feminist film theory: its inability to conceive of representation outside heterosexuality and its consequentially restrictive focus on sexual difference.⁴ Mayne's innovative approach allows her to recognize the ways in which lesbian subjectivity and desire are represented in terms of conventional fantasies, and yet also as radically different, in films like *Je tu, il, elle* (Chantal Akerman, 1974) and *Bildnis einer Trinkerin*, ('Ticket of No Return', Ulrike Ottinger, 1979).

The final section of *The Woman at the Keyhole* addresses another issue which has hitherto received scant attention in feminist film theory: an analysis of early cinema is put to use in an exploration of the relevance of 'primitive' narration for women's cinema.⁵ But while a 'primitive' fascination with otherness and with narration may well persist in the films of, say, Germaine Dulac and Maya Deren, extending this conceit to more recent films (*Cleo de 5 à 7* ['Cleo from 5 to 7', Agnes Varda, 1961] and *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* [Chantal Akerman, 1974], for example), in which, according to Mayne, 'female narration . . . is a reexamination of the traditionally and stereotypically feminine' (p. 211), does seem a little contrived. If films like *Reassemblage* (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1982) and *A Song of Ceylon* (Laleen Jayamanne, 1985) deconstruct western notions of the 'primitive', does this necessarily imply that these films recycle a 'primitive' cinematic style? It seems to me that the way in which these films represent and question the female body suggests a postmodern mode rather than a redefinition of 'primitive' narration as Mayne would have it.

Mayne's analysis of early cinema is convincing enough in itself; but reading this cinematic mode directly into contemporary women's films does raise the spectre of anachronism. Again, the book's structure proves problematic: to appropriate for the analysis of women's cinema concepts produced in entirely different contexts seems a forced and undialectical move. The pleasing polemical tone of *The Woman at the Keyhole* might have gained in richness had its compelling analyses of women's films fed back into theory. Disappointingly in a book otherwise so refreshing and original, discussion stops short of taking this step.

The screen, lesbian authorship and 'primitive' narration – the three focal points that Mayne singles out in her analyses – reveal the

⁴ The chapter on Dorothy Arzner has recently been reprinted in *Bad Object-Choices* (ed.), *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp. 103–35.

⁵ Uncanny coincidences? In the same year as *The Woman at the Keyhole* came out, one of Germany's leading feminist film theorists published a book on early German films: Heide Schlüpmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: Das Drama des frühen deutschen Kinos* (Basel/Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990). Schlüpmann extensively researched the aesthetics of a 'cinema of attractions' around 1910: films with a female protagonist showing her point of view, and even female voyeurism. She draws very much the same conclusions as Mayne: in those early days cinema was relatively discontinuous in terms of sexual difference: the possibilities of a female cinema disappeared, however, with the emergence of narrative cinema.

force of ambivalence in women's cinema. Ambiguity is definitely the favourite trope throughout *The Woman at the Keyhole*. Ambivalent tensions in women's cinema work against patriarchal dualisms and push at the limits of representation. It is in this manner that Judith Mayne's work points towards some overdue changes in the agenda of feminist film theory.

review:

William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990, 297pp.

Mary Ann Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 273pp.

JOY LEMAN

The consequences of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, an increase in censorship, the disastrous auctioning of the television franchises, the spread of satellite and the inching in of cable television are all aspects of a gradually changing face of television in Britain. The political and financial pressures behind 'reregulation' are not yet fully revealed and the long term consequences can only be guessed at. It seems timely therefore to consider the lessons that might be drawn from another country where, in an earlier period of draconian change in institutional organization and programme content, commercial and political pressures reshaped the direction of television.

In general, there is a dearth of well documented, properly researched and carefully focused published material on the history of television. The two books under review here are a welcome addition to the list. Both deal with key periods in US television history – the 1950s and early 1960s; but they are substantially different in style, content, mode of address and historical scope. *Fifties Television* by William Boddy examines the economic, organizational and legislative structures of US television in the 1950s, and considers the attitudes of those most directly concerned with policy and programme-making at the time. Mary Ann Watson's book, *The*

Expanding Vista, deals with the relationship between television and the political events of the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s. Both authors make a valuable contribution to a further understanding of the operations of television and of the way in which the structures and output of the media industry are subject to quite arbitrary factors thrown up by historical circumstance.

A crucial point to emerge from William Boddy's history of US television is that the 1950s was a period of intense struggle over programme content and structures of control. There was nothing either natural or inevitable about the shift from the tightly focused live studio dramas popular in the first half of the decade to the westerns, police series and ultimately fraudulent game shows which predominated by the end of the decade. Boddy provides an account of the struggle for control and for 'quality' television waged among writers, producers, newspaper critics, television networks, advertising agencies, sponsors and government broadcasting agencies. No contest, one might imagine: surely the latter four must be the winners? If they were, though, the victory was not secured without disruptions caused by the real and often unpredictable circumstances of history. An important contribution of studies such as Boddy's lies in their revelation of the conflicts of interest, the debates, and the contradictory statements of a period which has subsequently been woven into the seamless garment of history. *Fifties Television* shows how intense pressures were exerted on networks and broadcasters by the advertising lobby. In a political environment of intimidation and blacklisting, even programmes attracting high audiences were vulnerable to change where advertisers required a media environment more attuned to marketing household commodities and to projecting a world view commensurate with that objective.

It is salutary in this context to recall that in the USA of the 1940s, it was still not at all clear that television actually had any commercial potential: manufacturers and broadcasting executives had strong doubts as to whether people would be prepared to give the time and concentration considered necessary for watching television. The commercial possibilities of the new medium were seen by electronics manufacturers and commercial broadcasters in terms of 'a consumer product for the home and as an audio-visual showroom for advertisers' consumer goods'. (p. 20) In the context of the post World War II move to shift women out of the workplace and back into the home, the housewife was targeted directly in marketing strategies as 'household purchasing agent'. Contingent on this was 'the challenge of integrating television programming into the routines of the housewife's daily chores just as radio had done'. (p. 20)

If Boddy does not really deal with the question of how television executives' attitudes towards programming for the daytime viewer

differed from their idea of the wider target audience for 'prime-time' programming, however, he does trace the issues of finance and of cultural evaluation in which the Hollywood film industry and the television networks of the east coast were generally polarized. He also questions traditional historical accounts in which it is assumed that there was little co-operation between the film industry and the networks in the early period of television in the USA. In fact remarkably few good feature films were available to television prior to 1955, and even these were liable to be re-edited beyond recognition. Some astonishing advice – intended for television station managers and sponsors – on how to improve a film for television screening is quoted: ‘“eliminate all dark scenes that won’t show up on a television tube, and then all the long shots in which distant objects get lost”’. (p. 71) Boddy charts the gradual development over the decade of the telefilm industry. Initially it consisted of small, independent, high-risk production companies specializing in low-budget action adventure genres. Turnaround was rapid – ‘like the auto business’, according to one producer – and programmes were likewise treated as low cost manufactured commodities.

The public debate and terms of critical discourse around television had by 1953 polarized into an argument over standards. Hollywood film and everything associated with it were represented as somehow culturally debased, whilst live television was characterized as superior both in its modes of production – the crafted quality of the writing – and in its almost mystical qualities of immediacy of performance. The influential lobby of writers and critics presenting such arguments lined up with the television network bosses in articulating a defence of live television as ‘the shining center of the home’, as against film in which ‘the conformity and carbon copy boys are hard at work’. (p. 75) Boddy indicates that the anti-Hollywood rhetoric of the networks was rooted in economic self-interest. They wanted to keep film – and Hollywood competition – out of television altogether and to protect their control over affiliates (independent stations) and advertisers.

However, the expansion of audiences and the consequent rise in potential advertising revenue by the mid 1950s brought about a rapid and significant U-turn in the highminded attitudes of the networks. According to Boddy, ‘The shifts in television program sources and formats in the mid-1950s were inseparable from a new appreciation by network executives and others of the changing nature of the postwar consumer economy and the role of television as a sales agent in it’. In order to gain higher advertising revenues in the newly developing competition for audience ratings, the networks were prepared to censor or altogether sacrifice live anthology drama, and in general to limit the diversity of programme content. The type of television programmes preferred by the manufacturers of ‘low-

cost' consumer goods who were by the mid 1950s increasingly using television as a 'sales agent' were those with 'established ratings histories, which handicapped anthology programs and live programs and generally favoured formulaic program styles'. (p. 155)

The main problem, according to the sponsors and advertising agencies quoted in *Fifties Television*, was that the themes of these powerful, naturalist dramas and their images of working-class life simply did not stimulate sales. The glossy kitchens and crisp, smiling, white families of the women's magazines in Britain and the USA did not feature in the intense studio dramas that were being written for television. The fact that viewers were engaged by, interested in, or satisfied with, these programmes was considered unimportant in the face of the sponsors' desire to insert happy endings and uncontroversial themes in order to encourage a positive attitude towards consumerism. The solution for the advertisers was to intervene in the writing and production process, to attempt to set out a view of the world different from that of the dramatists and producers. In doing so they completely destroyed the rationale of the plays. Ratings started to fall, which then provided the advertising executives with even stronger reasons for replacing the live dramas with 'lighter' entertainment – westerns and police series.

Boddy provides a close analysis of the working methods of those involved in writing television anthology drama in its most productive period, focusing usefully on the interaction between material/organizational determinants and the dramatists' aesthetic practices and assumptions. However, it is a little disappointing that censorship is explained largely in terms of commercial pressures, with insufficient consideration of the effects of political repression on the themes and ideas of the dramas or on the employment of the writers themselves. And while the 'critical discourse' around live television drama in the 1950s might be sufficient justification for making it the central focus of the book, given that its subtitle invokes the broader sweep of the 'industry and its critics', some discussion of documentary and news/current affairs programming might have been expected. There were, after all, significant conflicts between journalists, advertisers and networks in attempts to expose and discredit the viciousness of McCarthy and his cohorts. Wider political and economic factors, including the Korean War, are also given little attention in the book, aside from a discussion of the corruption and scandals of the late 1950s: since these involved accusations against the Federal Communications Commission (the US equivalent of the Independent Broadcasting Authority/Independent Television Commission), the policies of the Truman and Eisenhower presidencies are inevitably discussed. Political censorship and the 'blacklisting of television personnel objectionable to the organised anticommunist Right' are covered in a scant two pages (pp. 99–100), with little insight to add to that offered by Eric

Barnouw in his 1975 book on the history of US television, *The Tube of Plenty*.

But despite its drawbacks, *Fifties Television* does make a valuable contribution to published research on the history of broadcasting. In focusing on the internal organizational and economic changes of the television industry over a significant decade, William Boddy provides a useful complement to Barnouw's classic text.

The Expanding Vista, Mary Ann Watson's book on television during the Kennedy years, picks up where William Boddy's account stops. Watson's central argument is that during the early 1960s 'television became truly central to American life', and that this was in large part due to the perception by President Kennedy that television was 'one of the most powerful and effective means of communication ever designed'. (p. 21) There are inherent problems in any study involving J.F. Kennedy, however. Watson's style is at times portentous and melodramatic, tending towards an awed tone of idealism in relation to Kennedy's achievements. The political framework of the study is explicit, and Kennedy's use of the medium to develop his objectives is acknowledged: on the 'New Frontier', political policies were on the offensive, with an agenda that was 'squeaky clean', ideologically and economically. The state of television is paralleled with that of the nation: 'In 1960 the television industry had something to prove. Like the nation, it was trying to overcome a malaise. Television too had suffered a decline in prestige brought on by a complacency with material success'. (p. 4) The 1961 speech made by Newton Minow, the Kennedy-appointed Head of the FCC, kicked off the debate; and the moral stance of the administration was made plain in his attack on the networks for offering viewers 'a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials – many screaming, cajoling and offending'. Minow characterized much of television, in a memorable statement, as a 'vast wasteland'. (p. 22)

Watson charts the changes in policies and programme content which took place in the next two-and-a-half years of the Kennedy era, changes due as much to historical and technological factors as to any new perspective independently adopted by the networks. Significantly, a crucial expansion of US television had taken place between 1956 and 1960, during which years the number of 'television households' had increased by twenty-five per cent. This coincided with the start of the Kennedy years, and whilst Watson perhaps tends to overpersonalize the involvement of Kennedy in these media developments, the politics of the period were

nevertheless inextricably bound up with the media. From the very start, Kennedy used television to project his image and style. He gave sixty-four live television press conferences which allowed him to 'get his ideas to the American public without a middleman'. (p. 76) Watson claims a major role for television in this: 'because of television, the presidency psychologically became the center of American government'. (p. 76) She also offers some insight into the political calculations made by Kennedy about his 'favourite' medium when she writes that 'because of his frequent press conferences, John Kennedy was cautiously selective about other television appearances. He understood that the mystique of leadership could not survive unsparing entry'. (p. 33) For example, a carefully orchestrated news special screened by the networks in 1962 (*After Two Years: A Conversation with the President*) gave Kennedy the opportunity to present himself and his policies in the most favourable light possible. Similarly, the inclusion of network television in the administrative arrangements for the US space programme had been part of a strategy to divert public attention away from the disaster of the attempted invasion of Cuba, according to Watson. (p. 114)

However, the media's relationship with political structures and events can be unpredictable, and television can sometimes find itself involuntarily advocating progressive measures. In this regard, a particularly strong part of Watson's book is its coverage of television's involvement with the Civil Rights movement, and also of internal and external pressures to change the predominantly white representation in the medium's programming and employment policies. The same news values of immediacy and dramatic impact which framed the Cape Canaveral space shots also made Civil Rights actions publicly visible: the networks were forced to expose the violence of the racists and to give black Americans the opportunity to speak out in news and current affairs programmes.

Watson also foregrounds the importance of documentary television in this area, claiming a special position for the genre in the climate of the early 1960s:

During the New Frontier, television documentaries were pushed to the limits of their potential – and in the process, Americans were offered privileged views of their leader, their country, and their world never before possible. (p. 144)

However, she does not examine the ways in which the aesthetics of direct cinema, in appearing to reveal previously closed structures of government or scenes from the domestic and work lives of prominent figures, served perfectly the purposes of New Frontier politics. But in terms of sheer output this was undoubtedly a positive and significant time for documentary television in America. The

1961–2 season, according to Watson, reached a never to be repeated peak in documentary output on network television.

With the end of the Kennedy era came an easing of pressure on the networks towards political reform. Lyndon Johnson was seen as a political ally of commercial broadcasting, favouring a *laissez-faire* approach to regulation. (p. 227) However, the imperatives of immediacy and drama in television news values were, later in the 1960s, to have enormous political impact on the course of the Vietnam War.